

Some Less Familiar West-Cornish Superstitions, Superstitious Practices, and Traditional Narratives in the Work of William Bottrell

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The writings of the Cornish folklorist William Bottrell (1816-1881), often overlooked in favour of those of his less expansive colleague Robert Hunt (1807-1887), are a rich source of Cornish lore and language that have otherwise disappeared from view. Much as is for instance known about witchcraft in Cornwall, it may, however, come as a surprise to many that to cast fire over a witch was, like drawing her blood (1, 86),¹ to break her spells. Indeed, one of the things that strike the reader of Bottrell's work is the role played by fire in his portrayal of traditional life, beyond its everyday use in heating and cooking. "Begone," says Madam Noy to Betty, who is alleged to be a witch, "or I'll set the dogs at thee, and throw fire over thee, doesn't [don't] think that I'm afraid of thy witchcraft." (2, 64)

A little girl called Cherry is said to be bewitched, suffering as she is from fits and other afflictions. All to no avail she has begged a penny piece from each of twenty seven young men, to buy a silver ring to cure her (cf. Opie and Tatem, pp. 326-327; Roud, pp. 174-175). A decision is therefore made: "We will go down one evenan ... and pass the cheeld, poor deer [sic], across the fire ; that's the surest way to break the spell and unbewitch her." (1, 86)

Not only humans, but also animals could of course be at risk. An ill-wished beast must be brought into the middle of a ploughed field, there to be bled on straw. As blood and straw were there burnt together, the witch would come bodily into the field, or her apparition would appear in the smoke, plain enough for her to be recognised. Another way forward was to burn a calf alive, to save the rest of the stock. This would ensure their protection for seven or nine years. An alternative device was to bleed a white hen on a millstone. "This prevents danger from the mill, for they say the mill will have blood every seven years." (1, 118-119; cf. Courtney, p. 208; Smith, 2016, 319-323.)

Incongruous though it may seem, the subject of witches, witchcraft and burning spills over into that of a traditional game called "Burning the Witch", which seems to have escaped Gomme, though we note a summary by Courtney (p. 208) that is clearly based on Bottrell's account now to be cited. At 1, 234 Bottrell writes of a Christmastide pastime "not known up the country":

"On the whole the best fun we had was in the game of 'Burning the Witch'. Many a tumble we got from the pole, and hard qualks (falls) on the stones of the floor, before we could burn the paper effigy of some rank witches, and some we could not set ablaze at all."

In a footnote on the same page, Bottrell expatiates as follows:

“To play the game of burning the old witch, a pole of about five feet long, such as a pike-staff or shovel-hilt, is placed with each end resting on a low stool. A lighted candle is placed on the floor at a short distance from the pole, on which the person who undertakes to burn the witch endeavours to keep sitting, with the feet also (crossed at the ankles) clear of any support or help, except a stick about five feet in length. In a slit at the end of this stick is placed the paper, or rag figure, to represent the witch to be burnt for fun, by the person sitting in this ticklish situation, who often falls many times before the paper figure can be burnt at the candle on the floor.”

While dealing with such recondite matters, we mention Dolly Pentreath of Mousehole, wellknown as reputedly the last person to speak Cornish, but also known as one of the “overwise ones”, as Bottrell puts it, “about whom we now often hear the whisper ... that she knows the hour and minute. This mysterious intimation,” he continues, “alludes to the general belief that there is an hour in every day, and a minute ... in that particular hour (which varies from day to day), in which we say, ‘curses will not fall to the ground.’ ” (1, 183)

What the imagery here seems to suggest is that curses as often as not “fall to the ground”, that is, fail to take effect, except at mysterious fatal moments known to none but the “overwise” or “demon-taught”. Elsewhere we are told of a woman who ill-wishes a neighbour, causing her to be “struck all of a heap”. She does not altogether mean to cause the harm she does, but it so happens that the words of her malediction pass her lips “at the fatal minute when ill-wishes won’t fall to the ground.” (2, 285) Note also, at 1, 81, a reference to “the black minute” when a curse will not fall to the ground. Later, on the same page, villagers are said to fear that they may have ill-wished someone’s straying or *breachy* goats and cattle “in the evil hour and minute”, thus subjecting themselves to the risk of being harmed by the vindictive owners’ counter-measures.

What form might these take? Here is a relevant account provided by Bottrell. “Water”, in other words urine, must be obtained from the ill-wished cattle. It is then sealed in a bottle, and buried close at hand, to be quickly retrieved and uncorked, “should anyone be in extremis”. Before a week has elapsed, half the women in Zennor, and many of the men, are indeed “in extremis”, feeling as they do that a spell has been put on them. Confessing that they have ill-wished their victims’ cattle, they beg that the bottle shall be uncorked, for they, the alleged perpetrators, or more specifically their bladders, are ready to burst (1, 81-82). It will be clear that the bottle magically represents the bladders of the alleged ill-wishers.

Much the same procedure is described under the heading “Conny Trevail’s Pig”.

“ ‘Es like a thing bewitched,’ said Conny, ‘a’ll neither live nor die ... Now I’ll tell thee what I’ll do ... to serve out that strollop who begrudged me the pig, and ef her ill wishes have fallen upon am [him, it, i.e. the pig] [rather than ‘to the ground’], I’ll make her suffer torments ... I’ll bury the bottle of water [obtained from the pig] before night ef I can; she shall come to me and beg and pray, and promise never to ill-wish anything belongan to me agen, she shall.’ ” (3, 77-78; cf. Opie and Tatem, pp. 416-417).

No less unsettling than all this is an account of freakish weather. Soon after midnight once, at a time of unabated merrymaking, a violent storm of wind, hail, and thunder blows up. At one moment, the sky is as black as pitch, at the next it is ablaze. Streams of lightning fall, and run hissing along the ground. All are terrified. In the general consternation, however, the happy thought occurs to someone that the sound of church bells might bring peace, driving away the evil spirits that ride upon the weather (cf. Opie and Tatem, p. 79). Lo and behold, at the very first stroke of the big bell the thunder-clouds roll away to the eastward. So frightened by all this are many, that they fall down in fits, and others, from the same cause, are never right in their heads again (2, 40).

Apropos of church bells, we note in passing the widespread custom of reading messages into their clangour. Probably the best known example is in the story of Dick Whittington, according to which the bells of Bow Church seem to say “Turn again Whittington, Thou worthy citizen, Lord Mayor of London.” In Bottrell’s story “Tom and the Knackers [knockers, underground spirits]”, Tom, a tinner, is said to know that sounds heard underground often seem to be words, “like Buryan bells of a weddan day ringan, ‘Poor man, undone!’ or ‘Go thee ways’t home with ragget-tail Jone!’ ” (2, 187) In this connection, Bottrell quotes the “old saying” *What the fool thinketh, that the bell clinketh*, for which the only counterpart known to me is Ramsay’s Scots proverb of 1737: *As the fool thinks the bell clinks* (Wright, 1898-1905, 1, 643, col. 1, 8; Smith, 2011, 402-404).

At this point it will perhaps be appropriate to mention a far less light-hearted saying. It is *The sun don’t/won’t shine on thee*, still according to Bottrell to be heard in his day in remote country places, and regarded as a very bitter taunt, even by those who were unaware of its allusion to a certain old belief about a man who swore away an innocent person’s life. As a result of this misdeed, the perjurer became quite rich, but began to ail. He looked deathly pale, and shivered with cold, no matter how warm the weather. When he stood in the sun, he cast no shadow. He could never see the sun, and the sky appeared dark to him, “yet he saw everything else the same as other people”. His neighbours surmised that he had been forsworn, and after his decease it turned out that he had indeed caused an innocent man’s death (2, 249-250; 3, 188).

Libations and other offerings next call for our attention. One of Bottrell’s characters, An’ [Aunt] Mary, who was well versed in old sayings and the like, remembered from her childhood a story relating to small people (fairies) that mentioned leaving *buryans* (crumbs) for Bucca [Hobgoblin]. When Bottrell himself was young, he tells us, there was a harvest-field custom at *croust* or afternoon refreshment, especially among most old folk, of pouring a few drops of their liquor on the ground “for good luck”, and of casting a fragment of bread over their right shoulder for the same reason. Fishermen would leave on the sand at night a fish for Bucca, and they were careful to feed their cats well, to ensure good luck in fishing. If tanners going to *bal* (work at the mine) met a *bulhorn* [shell-snail], they were always careful to drop before it a crumb from their dinner, or a bit of grease from their candle, again for good luck (2, 193-194).

In fact, not to leave an offering for the knockers, alias Bucca (cf. Hunt, p. 347) could lead to misfortune: “Tom Trevorrow! Tom Trevorrow! /Leave some of thy fuggun for

Bucca,/Or bad luck to thee tomorrow!” When Tom had eaten everything up without heeding this advice, the rhyme changed a little to: “Tommy Trevorrow, Tommy Trevorrow!/We’ll send thee bad luck tomorrow,/Thou old curmudgeon, to eat all thy fuggan,/And not leave a didjan [small bit] for Bucca!” (2, 187-188)

An agricultural custom next claims our attention. In the first half of the nineteenth century, elderly farmers in the Land’s End district would still commence the breaking of grassland with a kind of religious rite. On entering the field, the animals drawing the plough were turned towards the west. Saying “in the name of God let’s begin”, the ploughman proceeded to break ground by turning a few yards of sod with the course of the sun. Afterwards the field could be ploughed in any direction desired. Some observed the same rite on beginning to plough an arable field. Moreover, sowing commenced in much the same way, with a few handfuls of grain being cast around from east to west, for luck.

To follow the course of the sun was seen as a means of ensuring success in a good many other activities. Dairywomen would place their pans of milk in such a way that they could be *unreamed* or skimmed with the sun, from east to west. The preparation of butter involved stirring in the same direction. Young people danced round the Midsummer bonfire in the same order. If anyone danced in the wrong direction, they were fated to die unmarried. As the bonfire died down, young and old leapt through the embers towards the setting sun (3, 187).

To proceed against the sun was sometimes deliberate rather than accidental. In effecting traditional cures, the healer would proceed widdershins in order to *backen* or “reverse” the complaint, unwinding it, so to speak. Thus, rickety children subjected to treatment in a holy well on the three Wednesdays of May (cf. Hunt, p. 92, “the first three Wednesdays of flowery May”) were dipped thrice, then taken three times round the spring against the sun’s course. If after this procedure a sick child slept, and plenty of bubbles rose in the water, this augured well. Such wells or springs could also function as oracles. If one stamped on the ground near the well, the number of bubbles rising to the surface of the water would mark the number of years in answer to questions about time. Presumably questions must not be spoken aloud, since, as with many such rites, silence was imperative. Another necessity was a shred of the patient’s clothing, to be attached for instance to a nearby thorn tree (2, 239-241 and 3, 187-189; cf. Opie and Tatem, pp. 437-440).

Not surprisingly, the moon also played a part in the traditional treatment of various complaints. Cures for warts are for instance legion. Here is a practice called “washing in a dry dish” for the cure of warts and other ailments. A person with warts on his or her hands must show them to the moon nine times on three successive nights before full moon; three times on the full at intervals of threequarters of an hour; and three times afterwards, on three following nights. On each occasion the supplicant looks from hands to moon, while rubbing them together as if washing them, and holds them towards the moon nine times while saying: “I wash my hands in this thy dish,/O, Man in the Moon, do grant my wish, /And come take away this.” (3, 187-188)

Here now is Bottrell's account of an old-fashioned Cornish wedding as seen by one of the wedding guests. The happy couple have by the skin of their teeth escaped from the wedding feast and repaired to their night quarters in the hope, if not expectation, of being left to their own devices. The wedding guests are in hot pursuit:

“Up we went and found the bride and bridegroom, with their clothes on, having had no time to lock the door even.

We shall long remember the scene we then witnessed; the guests were beating them in bed, with stockings, straps, braces, or anything they could lay hands on. ‘Give them pepper,’ shouted young Jan, the groom's best man, ‘give et them, boys,’ and pepper them they did right merrily. Not wishing to be behind the rest, we took off our braces and followed suit. They continued this strange sport for a good while, until the leader said, ‘Less [let's] go back, soas [friends], or else we shall be all ill-wished, for it's nearly twelve o'clock’.

Away they again rushed back to the old folk's house; and each one on arriving, before speaking, touched the cravel (lintel or headstone of the hearth) with his or her head, for good luck.

The old folk seemed well satisfied when we returned, as it was not quite midnight.”

According to older members of the wedding party it was an old custom thus to tan or flog young married people to bed, “or else they would meet with bad luck all their days”. At more modish weddings, the guests would merely enter the bridal chamber and throw stockings “in which stones or something to make weight are placed” [!] at the bride and groom in bed, the first of whom to be hit betokened the sex of their firstborn.

Bottrell tells us that the older version of the custom was religiously observed “until lately”, which we take to mean about the mid-nineteenth century, in Zennor and other north coast parishes, where the newlyweds would be flogged to bed “with cords, sheep-spans, or anything handy for the purpose”, in the belief that this would ensure their happiness and numerous progeny. (2, 238-239)

There is a good deal here to be noted, apart from the remarkable account of beating bride and groom. There is for instance the understanding that the weddingers must return home before midnight, lest they be ill-wished. Then there is the requirement that, on arriving back at home, each member of the party must, while maintaining ritual silence, touch the cravel with his or her forehead.

The same custom involving touching the cravel with one's head is mentioned elsewhere, as when the Twelfth Night diviners would depart in silence to gather rushes and ivy leaves for divination, and return also in silence. If anyone did speak during this procedure, they had to go back and touch the cravel again. To make things more difficult, the procession was often waylaid or followed by those who tried mischievously to make the spell-workers break silence (2, 283-284).

We also note the conventions surrounding the christening of children. The mother of a child to be christened would draw a presage from the first person she met on leaving her threshold (cf. Opie and Tatem, pp. 161-162; Roud, pp. 82-83). To encounter a boy or man was a welcome sign that her next-born would be a boy, boys being seen as more useful, economically and otherwise. Our young mother must avoid meeting a woman, or, failing this, pass her on the right side as one would a witch, and pretend not to have seen her. Ideally, though, the young mother would after such an encounter return home, touch the cravel with her forehead, and then cast into the fire a handful of dry grass or any flammable material picked up by the way. Only then would she start back, hoping for better luck (3, 16-17).

In a footnote, Bottrell comments that the once general custom of touching the cravel to avert evil had in his day almost died out “with the disuse of open fire-places for burning furze and turf”. Fifty years before, it will, he says, have been known all over Cornwall and farther afield. He adds that a *pellar* or wizard called Lutey, then in great repute, urged those under his protection to perform the rite at stated periods, as a safeguard against witchcraft and bad luck (3, 17).

From the above it emerges that the cravel was of prime importance in the hierarchy of household effects and rituals surrounding them. It was the very heart of the house, its focus, bearing in mind that the word in Latin means “hearth”. This becomes clear from Bottrell’s account of the domestic arrangements that must take place before a family leave the house:

“Put out the fire, turn down [invert] the brandes [three-legged iron stand for supporting pans on the fire] on the bakan-ire [metal disk for baking on], cross the fire-hook and prong, sweep up the hearthstone, put on it a basin of spring water, for the ‘Smale people (fairies) and good luck’, like as the old folks ded, and some do still before leaving their houses shut up, then touch the cravel before crossing the drussel [threshold], lock the door, and away to Feast.” (3, 58)

The account of what to do on leaving one’s house clearly refers to a set ritual, matched for instance in the beginning of Hunt’s poem “The Spriggan’s Child”, where Janey Tregear “took good care to cover the fire; - Turned down the brandis on the baking-ire, swept up the ashes on the hearthstone ...” (pp. 89-95) For information on and illustrations of the cooking-pot support known as a *brandis* alias *brander*, see Brears, pp. 83 and 125, nos. 738-760, while a *baking-iron* is listed and shown on pp. 90 and 137, no. 973. See also Wright, 1986, pp. 3-4.

References to Hallantide, alias All Hallows or All Saints, in November remind one of Bottrell’s story associated with that feast (1,145) and called “The Calf’s Head Eats the Dumplings”. The main characters are Betty Toddy and a halfwit, Bucca, who is perhaps more astute than his reputation, and believes himself to be in love with Betty. Departing for church on Hallantide Sunday, Betty leaves Bucca in charge of the great crock or cast-iron cooking-pot that has been placed on the fire with its contents of beef, calf’s head, and dumplings, and just enough water to cover them. Bucca is to be sure to keep the crock boiling, and, when the broth is ready, to take some of this and a dumpling or two for himself. In fact he takes more than his share, and, no sooner have Betty and the rest of the congregation seated themselves

than Bucca tears into the church, crying out “Betty! Betty! Make haste home. The calf’s head have eat the dumplings all but one, and es chasing that round the crock like mad!”

Very much the same narrative crops up, not only in Scotland and Yorkshire for instance (Briggs, A2, pp. 264-265), but also as an element of the Grimms’ tale no. 81, “Bruder Lustig”, recorded in Vienna in 1815 by Georg Passy from the words of an old woman there. In her version, God and a Swabian share a lamb, from which the Swabian in cooking it steals and consumes the liver, insisting that the creature had none (1, pp. 392-404).

At this point we touch on the tale identified by folklorists as belonging to Type 325*, entitled “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice”, and summarised as follows: “A sorcerer’s apprentice who reads a verse from a forbidden book calls up a spirit, but cannot make him go away. When the sorcerer reads the verse backwards, the spirit disappears.” (Uther, 3, p. 209)

Here now is Bottrell’s version, beginning with the information that, one Sunday morning, whilst our sorcerer, or conjurer, a certain Matthew, alias Dionysios, Williams, was in Sennen church, only a few minutes’ walk from where he lived at Mayon,

“he felt very uncomfortable. Something told him that all was not right at home. He left the church in the midst of the service, and ran home just in time to find that his over-curious old housekeeper had taken one of the conjuring books out of the chest, the key of which he had missed and which she had stolen that morning for the sake of satisfying her itching curiosity. When he entered the room, he found her transfixed in her master’s chair looking like death in a fright, the book open before her in the place of some of the most powerful spells for calling up the worst of evil spirits. The woman appeared like one in a fit, without the power to speak or move, until her master came in the very nick of time to prevent the spirits (that she had unwittingly summoned by reading the words, and tracing over the signs in the book with her finger) from carrying her off bodily. Some of the spirits became visible; (3, 142) others lifted her, chair and all, off the floor when she stopped reading; and her fright made her fall in a fit. Mr Williams read and read till the sweat boiled from his body, before he had the power to drive the evil spirits from the room, and the old housekeeper had to undergo a severe penance before she could be free of all danger from them.” (3, 141-142)

The story was wellknown in the West Country and elsewhere. A variant that is close geographically to Bottrell’s is Coxhead’s Devonshire tale “The Black Hen” (Briggs, B2, p. 622). A relevant Devonshire fragment, “Parker of Luffincott”, is to be found in Smith, 2007, 424-425.

Bottrell tells us that in his day the story was still told in Sennen. There is another story that indicates the awe in which Williams, like other “astrologers of the west”, as Bottrell calls them, was held. It tells how, when he consulted his books one night, he discovered that his furze rick was being raided by some women of Sennen Cove. The next night, when an old woman arrived with such theft in mind, Williams cast a spell on her that caused her to be literally spellbound, rooted to the spot, which is where she remained throughout a long winter’s night, until she was finally released by the conjurer. The deterrent was effective, and the nocturnal forays ceased forthwith (2, 267; 3, 142).

Note

1. References like this, without author or “p” as an abbreviation for “page”, are, respectively, to the three volumes of Bottrell listed below.

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