

## Review

James, R. M., *The Folklore of Cornwall: The Oral Tradition of a Celtic Nation*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2018. 240pp., £45.

Robert Hunt, the great Westcountry collector, has been called “the first of the county field workers”, and is remembered for his *Popular Romances of the West of England*, published in 1865 but based on the researches of thirty years. In 1829 he embarked on a ten month walking tour of Cornwall, and he later engaged a local postmaster to gather stories on his behalf, which broke new ground at the time; he also drew on the research of William Bottrell who later produced his own *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall*. Here Ronald James provides the first modern overview of their work, breaking up his analysis into chapters on Giants, piskies, mermaids, etc., which closely mirror Hunt’s own categories, with additional material on the itinerant “droll tellers” and on the collectors themselves, which is very welcome. His explication of the links between Cornish mine spirits and North American “tommyknockers” is particularly fascinating.

Mr. James makes use of “comparative analysis” based on the Aarne Thompson Index of narrative motifs. In his bibliography Mr. James cites the 1961 collaboration between the two researchers, which was reprinted in 1987. This is quite correct, but it makes the theory sound much closer to our own time than it is; in fact, Aarne wrote his original *Index of Types of Folktale* in 1910, and it was steeped in the imperialist assumptions of late nineteenth century Europe, central to which was the need to map and appropriate the cultural property of subject races along with their natural and human resources; so their oral traditions were subjected to the organising intelligence of their rulers and their agents in the great universities of Western Europe. The discipline of Celtic Studies came into being at the same time for similar reasons.

But the stories were not told so that they could be categorised. They were told to try to make sense of the human condition in a particular community at a particular historic moment. The methodology thus becomes in itself an act of cultural appropriation. It also produces the curious effect of grouping the Cornish material with Scandinavian folklore on the basis of tale types; this would only be valid if there was evidence to demonstrate a closer relationship than that between Cornish folklore and, say, its French counterpart, but no such evidence is provided. In fact, Cornish language literature, which is nowhere mentioned here, despite its folkloristic content, demonstrates close affinities with Western Europe, particularly the other Celtic regions, and Cornish history tells the same story. In rebutting Manning’s anthropological explanation of mine spirits Mr. James says it is “a leap too far for the methodology of comparative folklore studies”. So much the worse for the methodology of comparative folklore studies, one might add.

And the method is in fact deeply questionable. In practice, stories are rarely found in a pure form; usually they demonstrate characteristics of more than one tale type, and their attribution to one tale type rather than another can seem arbitrary. Some doubt whether tale types actually exist outside the mind of the observer, who has a vested interest in finding

them. And they certainly tell us nothing about the meaning and social context of the tale. That said, this book is a notable contribution to the study of Cornish folklore, and will prove indispensable to scholars in the field for many years. It is beautifully produced by University of Exeter Press, with many nineteenth century illustrations. Its cover price may deter non specialist readers, which would be a great pity.

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