

Cornwall, Kenneth Grahame, and the Victorian Mind, Part 2*

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Fantasy and Reality

Grahame used his visits to Fowey to avoid his ambiguous feelings for his fiancé Elspeth.¹ He wrote letters in baby talk back to her in London. Though this must have seemed embarrassing even then, it can be understood as a way of avoiding intimacy at a time when she expected him to agree a date for their marriage which he kept putting off, though he did try to entice Elspeth down to Cornwall for an elopement:

“And if all goes well, my dear, do take yourself in bofe hands and arrange what is best for bofe of us. And if you can come down ere for your rest, why that would be the best fing on erf – but do just as you think best my own deer nanny. My sister is frettening to go on to the Lizzard to see friends and probably won’t return to me, and you and me will be free, my deer. Now I must say goodbye cos Mr. Q. as just corled to ask me to cum a sailin, Oran Picotee (Crimson bote, wite inside.)”²

This letter strikes a balance between avoidance and desire, a tension which is evaded, not resolved, when Quiller-Couch (Mr. Q.) calls round to ask him out to play. Despite this and several similar letters, a marriage was eventually arranged and took place a few weeks later, though Grahame made a last attempt to persuade her into an irregular relationship, and she always had to compete for his attention with his Cornish friends.³

Grahame kept in touch with Quiller-Couch and “Atky” over the years and also befriended an American visitor called Purves. A boat trip with them and the Purves children provided the inspiration for Mole and Ratty’s river picnic, which Grahame later referred to as “the Fowey bits of *The Wind in the Willows*”, forming an adjunct to the Toad saga which Grahame composed to entertain his son “Mouse”: Grahame’s tendency to use pet names also signalled his attachment to a lost childhood. One is inescapably reminded of Lewis Carroll, the Liddell children and the genesis of “Alice”.⁴ Grahame’s attachment to Fowey continued, though in 1911 he lamented its “discovery”, and the fact that it was becoming a popular tourist resort;⁵ later that year he was grief-stricken when his old friend “Atky” died in a boating accident off the Fowey rocks. Grahame wanted to buy the dead man’s house, but the plan fell through, and in the end he was never able to transform Cornwall from fantasy to reality.

Kitty Trenire

In 1909 Arthur Quiller-Couch’s sister Mabel published *Kitty Trenire*, one in her series of popular children’s books about five children growing up in rural Cornwall. The Trenire children’s parents resemble those of Grahame’s orphans in his semi-autobiographical *The Golden Age*, in that they are either dead or psychologically absent. Mabel Quiller-Couch was

a popular writer who lived much of her adult life in London. Her Trenire children, like Grahame's fictional orphans, are oppressed by the adults who have care of them: in his prologue, Grahame as narrator accuses the adult "Olympians" of indifference: "... as I recognise, the result of a certain stupidity characterised by a lack of imagination."

The principal carer of the Trenire children, Aunt Pike, certainly shows a certain stupidity, and at the end of his prologue Grahame ruefully acknowledges that he too may have become an "Olympian" over the years. In both books the children come to recognise that the adults are not too bad after all, just as the adults themselves acquire a certain humility.

In the wider framework of Victorian thought, children are associated with women, Celts, and other subject races, to be treated kindly but firmly because they are primitive, irrational, and superstitious, as opposed to adult, male Anglo-Saxons, who are rational, brave, and masterful. This framework is challenged by both Grahame and Quiller-Couch in their children's books, which both affirm the value of the imaginative world of children. We have something to learn from the lost world of childhood. The "lost world" is placed in different context, in the past, the childhood of the race, or in one's own children, the symbol of a time when one felt safe, close to God and Nature, the loss of which Arnold portrays so brilliantly in "Dover Beach".⁶ The children in these two books do not inhabit a noticeably religious world, but nor do they inhabit a close family circle (in both respects they resemble many other fictional children of the period, in the work of E. Nesbit, for instance), and this sense of absence and discontinuity was a characteristic of the time. Cornwall offers itself as a secular otherworld to compensate for these losses.

In both *The Golden Age* and *The Wind in the Willows* activities such as boating which, for Grahame, were strongly associated with Cornwall, play a prominent part, and the relationships between the leading characters recall the author's friendship with "Q" and "Atky". The Cornish children though have a resource which is not available to the English ones, though both have a rich imaginative life fed by reading. Mabel Quiller-Couch herself was heavily influenced by the Cornish folklore, which had been collected and published in the nineteenth century by Robert Hunt and William Bottrell, and by the Arthurian legends as they had been shaped by Malory and Tennyson. The Trenires have a special place called Wenmore Woods: "It might have been a fairy place, that would fade and vanish as soon as one turned one's eyes away."⁷

The woods were carpeted with windflowers and bluebells, primroses and wild orchids, a natural world which was rapidly disappearing throughout industrial Britain.

But this landscape is also associated with Cornwall's storied past:

"Here Enid rode with Launcelot by her side ... Vivien had sat at Merlin's feet. There in that space carpeted by wind-flowers and primroses Queen Guinevere and Launcelot had said their last farewells. To Kitty, the whole beautiful spot was redolent of them ... they were only sleeping somewhere, waiting for some spell to be removed. She was sure of it, as sure as she was that King Arthur sat sleeping in his hidden cave, spellbound until someone, brave and good and strong enough,

should find him and blow a huge blast on the horn which lay on the table before him and so waken him from his long sleep.”⁸

Kitty imagines herself in an ideal, romantic past

“dressed in flowing robes of white and gold, with her hair in long plaits reaching to her knees riding away beside the king through those very woods ... She saw herself a woman, such a beautiful, graceful woman, with earnest eyes and gentle face. She saw a knight, oh such a splendid, courtly knight, and he looked at her and looked again, and ...”⁹

Of course this has the elements of compensatory fantasy in the life of an insecure child who longs for her father’s love and misses her mother. (Though Mr. Trenire lives with his children he is always busy and gives them little of his time.) Kenneth Grahame also had an absent though living father and no doubt used fantasies of an ideal childhood in a similar way, and readers in similar situations no doubt do the same.

It is interesting that Kitty draws upon specifically Cornish stories to feed her fantasies, though she does see them through a late romantic, Tennysonian lens. Arthurian legend, heavily Anglicised, was used to bolster the Imperial project.¹⁰ But it also spoke to a widespread psychological need to re-enchant a modern world which had become divorced from the natural and the spiritual. For Grahame too, individual and social pressures created a need for fantasy, and Cornwall, in its new cultural reconstruction, helped to meet that need. But fantasy can provide no lasting solution, and Kitty is called away to lunch: “ ‘You need not have waited for me’, said Kitty, annoyed at having her dreams so broken in upon, ‘we have each got our own, and can eat them when we like.’ ”

Folklore and Desire

Many of the encounters with the otherworld recounted by Bottrell and Hunt contain elements of wish fulfilment. A distinct group of stories, including Hunt’s “The Fairy Widower” and “Cherry of Zennor”, imply a close relationship between “the other crowd” and their human visitors, and this is a common theme in Celtic folklore generally.¹¹

Cherry meets “a fine gentleman” at the crossroads: she is “a pretty but rather flighty 16-year old girl”, and she agrees to go with him to nurse his child. She accompanies him to a hidden land of extraordinary beauty; Cherry gets on well with the child and grows fond of “the gentleman” who is kind to her, until she discovers his magical powers, when he tells her she will have to return to Zennor. In Hunt’s words:

“He kissed Cherry, told her she was punished for her ‘idle curiosity’, but that he would, if she behaved well, come sometimes to the Lady Downs to see her. Saying this he disappeared ... Her parents had supposed her dead. And when they saw her, they believed her to be her own ghost. Cherry told her story, which everyone doubted, but Cherry never varied her tale, and at last everyone believed it. They say that Cherry was never afterwards right in her head, and on moonlight

nights, until she died, she would wander on to the Lady Downs to look for her master.”¹²

Mabel Quiller-Couch retold the story as “The Strange Story of Cherry Honey” in her collection of folktales *Cornwall’s Wonderland* published in 1914.

Anne Jefferies was a real young woman from St. Teath who was born in 1626 and was thought to have died in 1698.¹³ She left home to go into service. At night she would wander around looking for the fairies. One day in the garden she met six little men, the grandest of whom greeted her kindly and “clambered upon her bosom and neck, and began kissing her. Anne never felt so charmed in her life as while this little gentleman was playing with her ...” and the “little gentleman” takes her away to a magical world of “temples and palaces of gold and silver trees laden with fruits and flowers. Lakes full of gold and silver fish, and the air full of birds of the sweetest song and the most brilliant colours,” occupied by hundreds of “ladies and gentlemen idling and dancing”.¹⁴ This fascinating description presents us with a Cornish landscape which has been radically transformed from an industrial present (when Hunt heard the story in the 1840s) to an idyllic and unspoilt past. It also introduces an element of class division, between the servant girl Anne and the “ladies and gentlemen”, which we also see in Cherry’s tale, the fantasy of bridging the class divide, a staple theme in romantic fiction.¹⁵

The “ladies and gentlemen” in Anne’s story are now adult sized. Anne and her favourite now separate from the others, and “lovingly did they pass the time, and Anne desired that this should continue for ever”. Eventually there is a fight among the otherworldly people, and Anne is miraculously restored to her own world. Her neighbours believed that she had a continuing relationship with the fairies, by whose aid she could heal the sick. “People of all distempers, sicknesses, sores and ages, who came not only so far off as the Land’s End but also from London. She took no moneys of them nor any reward that ever I knew”, according to the clergyman Moses Pitt, who investigated the matter on behalf of the local bishop.¹⁶ His letter provides an interesting postscript to Anne’s story. He described her as still living in 1696, in the seventieth year of her age. She recounted her visions of the fairy people, which sometimes frightened her, and declared her faith in God. She seems to have suffered from convulsions, and had stopped eating with her family, claiming that the fairies fed her. Eventually she was committed to Bodmin prison by the magistrate John Tregeagle, on the charge of communing with evil spirits, which she denied, quoting St. John, “Dearly beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, whether they are of God”. Anne was eventually released, and it is interesting to note that her path crossed that of the notorious Tregeagle, himself the focus of so much folklore, though the otherworld with which he communicated was very different to poor Anne’s, if indeed, this was the “same” Tregeagle. Eventually she married a man called William Warren and no more is heard of her. It is rare for characters in folktales to have any documented biography, but in this case Anne’s frustrated desires seem to have found expression within a narrative tradition which validated them, much as Kenneth Grahame’s emotional needs could be expressed within an emerging narrative tradition in the wider world.

If, as many believe, the histories of real people can attract stories from the pre-existing folk tradition, it may be that narrative traditions can also incorporate the lives of real people, given the right psychological and historical circumstances. Mabel Quiller-Couch's version of Anne's story omits most of these biographical details. Her *Cornwall's Wonderland* consists mostly of retellings of Hunt (with the tale of Tristan and Yseult derived from Beroul). They are well-written and entertaining, but whereas Hunt is concerned with preserving the stories as he heard them, "the genuine household tales of the people" (at least in theory), Quiller-Couch adapts them for children, and non-Cornish children at that. And she writes fluently and well – no doubt she captured the imagination of countless children.¹⁷ But in doing so she changed the stories from traditional tales celebrating communal identity into commodified entertainment for an audience which did not share the history and culture of the original audience.¹⁸ Hunt's stories, of course, had already been transformed from Cornish into English, from "hearthside" stories into an item on Chatto and Windus's list alongside popular fiction by Grant Allen, Walter Besant (author of *Armored of Lyonesse*) and George Daniel's *Merrie England in the Olden Times*. Mabel Quiller-Couch's adaptations helped stimulate the growing tourist trade, as similar adaptations still do.¹⁹ These adaptations make use of only a small proportion of Hunt's stories though, and tend to focus on giant and pixie (piskie) stories. Donald Rawe's book places folktales alongside other material to present a wider view of Cornish culture.

The Wind in the Willows

The children who enjoyed this material would also have enjoyed Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. His popular books of idealised childhood, *The Golden Age* and *Dream Days*, are more realistic, but talking animals and the great god Pan introduce a stronger fantasy element into the later book. Having said that, the principal characters, Mole, Ratty, and Badger, live a solid middle class lifestyle not unlike that of Grahame himself – they live in a world of policemen, washerwomen, and motor cars, and invisible servants who keep the food coming in the very English homes of Ratty and Badger. It is also a world of threatening proletarians, who occupy the wild wood which lies outside the comfortable middle class enclave.

Grahame's books were part of a great flowering of writing for children which took place in England around the turn of the century.²⁰ Apart from the folklore collections already referred to, there was new fiction which often drew on folklore elements, such as Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* and *Puck of Pook's Hill*, E. Nesbit's charming stories about the Bastable children, and J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, which have retained their popularity to the present day. All these books introduce magical elements into the comfortable world of middle class childhood, freeing fictional children from the tyrannical rule of the "Olympians", Grahame's word for the adults who control children's lives. While retaining a sense of the stability which adults may provide, they also express a desire for freedom and autonomy.

Into this framework of course, writers wrote stories which they hoped would sell, as well as expressing their own personal dilemmas. To do this the stories had to reflect the

tensions and concerns of the adults who bought the books, and this was the most important measure of their popularity. The Roosevelt family were among Grahame's most eminent fans (it was said that the Kaiser was another). The president initially felt that *The Wind in the Willows* was a disappointment after the earlier books, but:

“After a while Mrs Roosevelt and two of the boys, Kermit and Ted, all quite independently, got hold of ‘The Wind in the Willows’, and took such a delight in it that I began to feel that I might have to revise my judgement. Then Mrs. Roosevelt read it aloud to the younger children and I listened now and then. Now I have read it and re-read it and have come to accept the characters as old friends, and I am almost more fond of it than of your previous books.”²¹

They seem like old friends because they are: Grahame's old Cornish friends, “Atky” and “Q”, and the book is pervaded by the warmth that marked those relationships. But the book was not well received by critics at the beginning, though Richard Middleton in *Vanity Fair* did identify a strain of pantheism which met a contemporary need. Grahame himself, jealous of his privacy, denied that the book had any personal meaning, but the “intimate sympathy with nature” that Middleton identified was certainly something that he himself possessed. A. A. Milne's adaptation of the adventures of Toad, as “Toad of Toad Hall” was hugely popular, but the “Dulce Domum” and “Piper at the Gates of Dawn” chapters are more characteristic of Grahame's writing. In the first, Mole is overcome by an overwhelming longing for his abandoned home: “... that small enquiring something which all animals carry inside them, saying unmistakably, ‘Yes, quite right: this is home!’ ”

Dislocation and Reconstruction

Grahame himself undoubtedly felt this sense of loss, because of his own lost childhood, but it was also a characteristic of the wider society, caused by industrialisation, the growth of the city, and environmental destruction, eroding the sense of community and the customs, practices and languages that had once bound people together. Social relations, as Beatrice Webb found them in London, had “no roots in neighbourhood, in vocation, in creed, or for that matter in race”,²² and this sense of fragmentation, discontinuity and isolation contributed to the alienation and loneliness of urban life, combined with the “melancholy, long withdrawing roar” of the sea of faith which many commentators noted. Thomas Hardy's extraordinary poem “God's funeral” (anticipating Philip Pullman) captures that particular note of sadness and disorientation:

“How sweet it was in years far hied
To start the wheels of day with trustful prayer.
To lie down liegely at the eventide
And feel a blest assurance he was there?
And who or what shall fill his place?”²³

Apart from this pervasive sense of loss there was a growing perception that the stability of the world order, which had underpinned British supremacy for so long, was beginning to

crumble. In his “Ode on the Day of the Coronation of King Edward VII” the then popular poet William Watson voices the then not infrequent speculation that the British imperial project might carry the seeds of its own destruction:

“Already is doom a spinning, if unstirred
In leisure of ancient pathways she lose touch
Of the hair, and overmuch
Recline upon achievement, and be slow
To take the world arriving, and forget
How perilous are the stature and port that so
Invite the arrows ...”²⁴

Ruskin had not been alone in perceiving a “loss of fellowship with nature and the countryside” as the repository of the spiritual values associated with the past to which the ugliness and malaise of the present were opposed. Grahame’s father had been lost in alcohol and depression, and one of the few memories he had of him was a shared love of water and boats, a love which he rediscovered on his Cornish holidays with “Q” and “Atky”. Nor was he alone in finding such a refuge in Cornwall: in the Duchy itself much energy and money was being spent on creating a fantasy world to meet the emotional needs of visitors. Though mass tourism in Cornwall really arrived in the 1920s and 1930s it had been growing slowly since the coming of the railways.²⁵ This process led towards a new post-industrial Cornish economy at the same time as the “Cornish Revival” – the Gorsedd and the Cornish Language movement – were pointing to a new Cornwall based on a pre-industrial “Celtic” past.²⁶ The new cultural constructions of the Duchy emphasised rural elements associated with the past rather than recent industrial history but, as time went on, the past, or at least parodic versions of it, were to become part of the tourist industry, as at Tintagel, though the results were not always edifying.

In effect, Cornwall was being reconstructed on different levels. Aspects of Cornish culture, particularly the Arthurian material, had already been appropriated into the imperial project.²⁷ Now though those stories were beginning to be used to sell Cornwall as a holiday destination – hence the name of the “King Arthur” hotel at Tintagel. Kenneth Grahame incorporated aspects of his Cornish experience, particularly those which reminded him of a lost intimacy with his father, into a fiction which provided comfort not only for himself but also for children and others (perhaps including President Roosevelt) who felt increasingly alienated from the contemporary world. But so far as Cornwall itself was concerned, the dominant construction was imposed from the outside.

Notes

1. A. Prince, *Kenneth Grahame: An Innocent in the Wild Wood*, London, Alison and Busby, 1994, pp. 165-172.
2. Prince, p. 164.
3. Prince, pp. 167-168.

4. Unhappy childhood seems to have provided the impetus for many nineteenth century writers. See for instance Jenny Uglow's comments on Tennyson and Lear in J. S. Uglow, *Mr. Lear: A Life of Art and Nonsense*, London, Faber and Faber, 2017.
5. Prince, p. 262.
6. W. E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870*, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 1957, pp. 85-86.
7. M. Quiller-Couch, *Kitty Trenire*, London, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1909, p. 87.
8. Quiller-Couch, 1909, p. 88.
9. Quiller-Couch, 1909, p. 89.
10. S. L. Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001; J. Higham, *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History*, London, Routledge, 2002.
11. R. Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England*, 3rd edn, London, Chatto and Windus, 1881, pp. 114-118, 120-126. See also M. Duffy, *The Erotic World of Faery*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1972.
12. Hunt, p.126.
13. Hunt, pp. 127-129.
14. Hunt, pp.128-129.
15. See Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, for instance, and in a Cornish context, the "Poldark" novels.
16. Hunt, p. 470.
17. M. Quiller-Couch, *Cornwall's Wonderland*, London, J. M. Dent, 1914.
18. By then this process was going on all over Europe and the colonies. See, for instance, H. E. Davidson, and A. Cheavabri, eds, *A Companion to the Fairy Tale*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2003.
19. See, for instance, E. Molony, *Folk Tales from the West*, London, Kaye and Ward, 1971, and E. Quayle, and M. Foreman, *The Magic Ointment and Other Cornish Legends*, London, Anderson Press, 1986, both excellent. Donald R. Rawe's *Traditional Cornish Stories and Rhymes*, Padstow, Lodenek Press, 1971, is closer to the original spirit of the stories though.
20. M. Drabble, ed., *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 198-199.
21. Prince, p. 239.
22. Houghton.
23. See A. N. Wilson, *God's Funeral*, London, John Murray, 1999.
24. Sir William Watson, *A Hundred Poems, selected from his various volumes*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1922, p. 15.
25. B. Deacon, *A Concise History of Cornwall*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2007, p. 197.
26. P. Payton, *Cornwall: A History*, Fowey, Cornwall Editions, 2004, pp. 237-267.
27. See Higham.

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