

*The Land of the Green Man: A Journey through the Supernatural Landscapes of the
British Isles*

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The first question this book raises is that of its intended audience: it is not a fully-fledged academic study, though it is engaging and informative, which places it as aimed at the intelligent and interested public reader. This is made obvious by its somewhat repetitive nature regarding the folk tales it tells, which dulls the palate a little. This repetition is further compounded by each chapter's conclusion clumsily summarising the journey 'we' have made, rather than advancing a clear academic argument. The book is also not organised by region, therefore it is awkward as a guide, and the breadth of its geography and its typology means it cannot delve into the philosophy or deeper psychology of the folk tale.

The Land of the Green Man begins at one of the most famous of English landmarks, The White Horse of Uffington. Scribed into the chalk down, it has a physical relationship with that word 'landmark'. It is both a mark on the land, and a marking of that particular land. As Carolyne Larrington notes in her introduction, it is also 'wonderfully elegant' and 'visible from the Great Western railway as it runs from Didcot to Swindon, if you know where to look for it' (1). There is something of a contradiction in Larrington's contingent observation: her 'if you know' compromises the Horse's visibility: a horse carved into the hillside might stop us all in our tracks, might dominate its own horizon and ours, and be hard to miss – but no: you have to 'know where to look for it'. So, by extension, you have to know to look for it at all.

Larrington's caveat highlights a tension that underwrites this book itself. She begins by telling us that she is sitting on the hillside, in the summer breeze, watching a tradition that goes back centuries: the Scouring of the White Horse. This elongated moment as she describes it, the sun, the 'smell of crushed grass', the 'cotton-wool cumulus clouds sailing over the valley' (1), typifies the kind of pause we all desire, in which the pastoral provides sensual pleasure and returns us to ourselves by taking us out of time.

The sudden appearance of the Great Western railway interrupts the moment, ushering in modernity, its inevitable compression of time, and our consequent tunnel existence. As we speed through the countryside, intent on arriving, what do we fail to see or hear? That the Horse, for all its presence and antiquity, might so easily be missed, further suggests that quieter stories and figures go unheard, unseen. Unremarked. The opening paragraph of the book's introduction is therefore a clever and strangely moving gambit, for the Scouring of the White Horse involves the cleaning and re-chalking of the figure into the hillside: literally, re-marking, that the Horse may be remarked by and for posterity. But – posterity will need to 'know'.

In this, arguably, lies Larrington's intention, to remark and thereby, re-connect, old stories to landscape and to us. It is an intention that believes in a sort of hunger for such connections. We have, she says, 'lost contact with the landscape' while 'our yearning to belong somewhere [...] is an enormously powerful drive' (7); equally strong 'is our longing to be told stories, tales which draw their energy from the places where we live or where we travel' (7). She acknowledges the efforts of nineteenth-century collectors of folk lore, who gathered such tales, ballads and so forth into the safe preservation of the academy, thereby perhaps stripping them of that vitality which is also called relevance: 'quaint, outmoded' and nothing to do with the 'modern age', they would 'vanish into libraries, locked up in leather covers, to become the preserve of [...] mad-eyed enthusiasts' (8). But – and this is where Larrington recovers her undertaking from an uncritical Romanticism – 'the stories fought back' (8). In the work of the likes of Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Susan Cooper, Alan Garner, Neil Gaiman, and J. K. Rowling, we see that, as these writers have, 'British folk legends and the supernatural creatures who inhabit them have important things to say about human existence' (8).

Unsurprisingly then, roving round the British Isles, Larrington uncovers dragons, worms, witches, brownies, giants and more, all at the same tricks. Giants from Shropshire to Yorkshire hurl stones at each other, and drop mighty mounds of soil to form tors, ridges and knolls; mortals from Cornwall to Scotland are hopelessly and horribly in thrall to elf-queens or beings from the Otherworld, while the boundary between animal and human is crossed with heart-breaking consequences across the land and across time. Giants are responsible for many startling features in the landscape: The Wrekin in Shropshire 'seem[s] wrong in scale [...] someone *must* have put [it] there' (15). Indeed, it was a giant heading towards Shrewsbury toting a spadeful of earth with which he would dam the River Severn and flood the town; without wanting to spoil the story, he fails in his endeavour, and leaves the soil at

the roadside to become the Wrekin (14). A more thoughtful and domestic giant, Wade, built a causeway for his wife Bell, so that she could avoid the moorland bogs in her farming tasks, up above Whitby (16-17). The giants are fun, but it is the sinister seductions by elf-queens, and the metamorphosing seals and wolves that come closer, addressing recognisable fears regarding desire, human nature and need. All these creatures ‘remain good to think with and good to feel with – they tap into our concerns, anxieties, questions about being human and about how we live now, in this land.’ (Larrington 2015: 10)

Larrington’s taxonomy reflects her intention, so her stories are grouped under chapter headings such as ‘Lust and Love’, ‘Death and Loss’, ‘Continuity and Change’, ‘Gain and Lack’. Two further chapters, ‘The Land over Time’ and ‘The Beast and the Human’, examine story and environment, and boundaries between human and non-human respectively. The stories are respectfully told, with pace and drama, and they move the chapters along, although the similarities these tales share breeds an air of unwanted familiarity. It is a danger of such books that these beings, because they function as motifs of love, desire, anxiety, become repetitive, and finally unremarkable. This is even more of a possibility if the intended reader, as I suspect they might well be of such a book, is already quite well-versed in British folklore. This is what I mean by the book’s tension: if you know to look, you probably already know the tale and the argument. What should leaven the fare are the echoes of these tales, which Larrington finds in literature and contemporary fiction. However, there are not enough such discussions, nor, when they occur, do they tell us anything new. The discussion of ‘Goblin Market’ by Christina Rossetti, for example, is a distillation of several, much-rehearsed interpretations. That said, Larrington is deft and crisp in her writing, and at the price, the book might grace a bedside table as a particularly fun and interesting traversal of Great Britain.