

From ‘Tiddy Mun’ to ‘Sam’l’s Ghost’ – Exploring the Content of the ‘Legends of the Cars’ (1891), as Collected by Marie Clothilde Balfour

Maureen James, Independent Researcher

This article provides critical evaluation on the evolution of a set of ten stories collected in and around the northern Lincolnshire village of Redbourne by Marie Clothilde Balfour in the late 1880s. These tales, only loosely describable as ‘legends’, were published in three instalments, and in dialect, with a lengthy introduction, in the journal *Folk-Lore* (now *Folklore*) in 1891, under the title ‘Legends of the Cars’. Many of them have been the subject of critical and creative attention since Balfour initially gave them prominence. Some critics have also claimed that the tales, which include supernatural and dark folk beliefs, may have been invented by Balfour, and hence only became ‘folk tales’ *a posteriori*. This criticism was the reason for my carrying out a full investigation of the ‘Legends’, for which I was awarded a PhD in 2013, in which I concluded that they were likely from the oral tradition of the area of collection. I have, since then, retained my interest in the ‘Legends’ including, not just the verifiable supernatural content, but also the ways that they have evolved and migrated. This article discusses the tales, their unique qualities, and their range, before going on to consider their authenticity.

‘Tiddy Mun’, the opening tale in Balfour’s first instalment (1891: 149–56), is the tale of a water spirit – a ‘tidy mun’ or tiny man – who looked after the people of the Ancholme Carrs, the plain between the Lincolnshire Wolds and the Lincoln Cliff, through which the River Ancholme flows north to the Humber. This plain was often subject to inundation; whenever the water rose to the door-sills, we are told, the people would call out to Tiddy Mun for help,

and by morning the water would have receded. The tale explains how when the Dutchmen, in the seventeenth century, carried out the drainage (which took place in North Lincolnshire and further south in the Fens), the people were afraid that Tiddy Mun would be angry. They blamed him when things went wrong, but then decided to go out at the time of the new moon and offer water to him with the call ‘Tiddy Mun, wi’out a name,/ Here’s watter for thee, tak tha spell undone!’ After this, things returned to normal.

This tale has many commonalities with ‘The Strangers’ Share’, included in Balfour’s second instalment (278–83), the ‘strangers’ being multiple land-based little creatures who live symbiotically with humans, helping crops and flowers in return for tributes. More often, however, the tales are distinct from one another. ‘The Dead Moon’ (159–64), the second tale in the first instalment, tells of how the moon descended to investigate the horrors that stalked the boggy lands of the carrs, and became trapped by those creatures, but not before she had shone her light to help a man find his way to safety. When the new moon did not appear, the people grew worried, and asked the local wise woman for help. She could not see where the moon was, but told them how to protect themselves from the horrors. In time the man who had been saved by the moon came back to the village, told the people his story, and enabled them to find the moon. They did this, and ever since, the moon has shone brighter and clearer over the bogs than anywhere else.

‘A Pottle of Brains’ is the final tale of the first instalment. It was described by Balfour as being of the type known by folklorists as a ‘droll’, and concerns a man who still lived with his elderly mother and who, because of his foolishness, kept getting into trouble or was ridiculed. The man wanted to buy some brains and went to see the local wisewoman for advice. She gave him a task and then a riddle to solve, and because he failed the latter she

sent him away. The fool returned home to find his mother was dying peacefully, believing he had his brains. He returned to the wisewoman and again failed to get help. A girl who lived nearby saw him in despair and helped him to cope with the loss of his mother. In time they married, and he returned to the wisewoman with his wife, who whispered the answers to the riddles. He was told by the wisewoman that he now had his brains and that they were in his wife's head.

'The Green Mist', which opens Balfour's second instalment (259–64), is different again, but still carries preternatural threat. This is the story of a young girl who had been beautiful, but who then became pale and began wasting away. She hoped that she would be able to see the green mist that appeared over the flatland in the spring, and that she might live as long as the cowslips that grew by the gate. She then grew stronger day by day, saw the mist, and was tending the cowslips when a young man stopped to talk to her. As they chatted, he picked a cowslip to give to her; she took it, then ran indoors, where she quickly withered and died with the cowslip in her hand.

'Yallery Brown' (264–71) concerns an encounter between a farm labourer named Tom, who did not like work, and a tiny man whom he has released from under a stone. The creature granted Tom a wish in return, and he requested help with his work. He was then told by the creature never to thank him for his help. In time, Tom found that not only was his work done each day, but the other labourers' work was undone. Tom was dismissed from his job and went to Yallery Brown to say: 'I'll thank thee to leave ma alo'an' (269). The creature then gave him fool's luck for the rest of his life, telling Tom:

Wo'k as thou wull

Thou'll niver do well;

Wo'k as though mowt

Thou'll niver gain owt;
For harm an' mischance an' Yallery Brown
Thou 's let oot thy-sel' fro' unner th' sto'an (270).

'The Dead Hand' (271–8) relates how another young man, Long Tom Pattison, ignored the advice of others to carry a keep-safe, i.e. a protective lucky charm, when out at night. He dared to cross the Carrs on the darkest night of the year with just a lantern, and was then attacked by the horrors, including a disembodied hand that pulled him into the bog. He reappeared seven days later 'a-gibberin', ginnin', an' grinnin' at th' horrors, as nobbud hisself [i.e. as no-one but himself] cud see' (277).

Those two tales are neighbours in the 'Legends', and can be regarded loosely as counterparts, both focusing on young men who encounter misfortune by failing to take advised precautions.

Two tales from the final instalment of the 'Legends', 'Fred the Fool' (409–13) and 'Samuel's Ghost' (414–17), are much more closely connected, comprising two halves of what is fundamentally the same tale, collected from two different informants. Fred was a skinny lad who was hired by a farmer as a live-in labourer. The farmer thought he would not cost much to keep, but he was wrong. Fred upset his master so much that he had his nail pulled off for stealing food, lost his hand for stealing clothes, then lost his arm for stealing money. Finally, he was given the task of protecting the hayricks from night-time arson attacks. Whilst doing this, Fred fell asleep, the ricks were set ablaze, and he was soon thrown on the fire by the master.

In the second half of the story, the main character, this time called Samuel, who had been burnt to death in a fire, got up and was told to go to see the Great Worm who would eat him up so that he can rest in his grave. He followed the instructions but found that the Worm

would not eat him until he had first found his ashes, then his arm, then his nail. He couldn't find the latter so was destined to walk forever as a purgatorial spirit, between worlds.

The remaining tale, which is the first of the third instalment, is the gruesome, poorly told story of how a young lad met a young lass and swore that he would marry her. She replied that she wanted a church wedding and that if she did not have one she would put a spell on him. His response was that if they did not wed, the worms could eat him up and their children would have wings to fly away.

They could not find a parson in a fit state to marry them, and in time they came to a cottage and knocked at the door. There was no answer, so they walked right in to find an old man asleep on the bed. The lad killed him with an axe and chopped him up. They threw the body outside, tidied the place up and moved in. Eventually they had children and one day when the lad returned home he could not find the 'childer'. When the lass said they had flown off, he killed her, and when they returned, they killed him. The story then relates how, after death the lass chases the lad and turns into a great worm with the head of the lass, who eats him up.

At the time of publication, The Folk-Lore Society produced a glowing advertisement for what would turn out to be the first of a three-part series of tales:

Folk-Lore for June is a particularly interesting number. Miss M.C. Balfour opens it with three Legends of the Lincolnshire Cars ... These are told in a dialect ... and we can well believe that they have been taken down faithfully. Like most genuine English stories, they are emphatically of a grim purport.

So popular were these three tales, in fact, that Balfour was asked to send more if she could, which is what led to three instalments being included in subsequent editions of the journal.

In 1894, Joseph Jacobs included three of the ‘Legends’ in his book *More English Fairy Tales*, though he made alterations, many clearly intended to open the stories to a wider audience. He edited the stories slightly, removing most of the dialect, and changed the title of ‘The Dead Moon’ to ‘The Buried Moon’. His comments in the preface expressed his views: ‘the tales reported by Mrs Balfour [...] are a veritable acquisition. I only regret that I have had to tone down so much of dialect in her versions’ (Jacobs 1894: xi). Jacobs, in his notes, strangely described ‘Yallery Brown’ as being from the Lincolnshire Fens, and The Buried Moon as from the Lincolnshire Carrs – perhaps a result of him not being familiar with the area, and thinking they are interchangeable names for the same location.

The stories had begun their ongoing journey or reversioning in print. However, that was only picked up again in the middle of the last century. In 1955, the folklorist Ethel Rudkin quoted at length from Balfour's text, and from three of the ‘Legends’, in the Ancholme Valley section of a paper she read to the Folklore Society on the ‘Folklore of Lincolnshire: Especially the low-lying areas of Lindsey’. A decade later, the stories were described as ‘hidden treasures’ by the folklore scholar Richard Dorson in his introduction to *Folktales of England* (1965), and in 1969 Alan Garner included faithful retellings of ‘Yallery Brown’ and ‘The Green Mist’ in his *A Book of Goblins*. The latter have recently been reproduced, along with Garner’s rendition of ‘The Flyin’ Childer’, in his *Collected Folk Tales* (2011).

Between 1982 and 1997, Kevin Crossley-Holland closely adapted eight of the ten ‘Legends’. Though he credited Balfour as his source, the inclusion of the words ‘from East Anglia and the Fen Country’ in three of his book titles gives the impression that they are from the more southerly Fenland. Crossley-Holland also modified what he called the ‘heavy Lincolnshire dialect’ (Crossley-Holland 1982: 97, 1997: 203). Having previously been brought to a wider audience, the tales were now explicitly, if inadvertently, being claimed for a part of the

country in which they had not originated. In 1989 the Norfolk storyteller Hugh Lupton toured the Fens of Cambridgeshire and South Lincolnshire, telling a selection of tales purportedly from the Fens. The performance, which included renditions of four of the Balfour-collected 'Legends', received funding from Eastern Arts, and was later released on a double cassette tape. The illustration used for the cover was a 1720 map of The Great Level of the Fens, which likewise moved the 'Legends' geographically away from Lincolnshire, to Norfolk and Cambridgeshire (Lupton 1989).

Fenland storyteller and collector Polly Howat then included four of the 'Legends' in her *Ghosts and Legends of Lincolnshire and the Fen Country* (1992). However, due to her publisher's requirement that she attribute each tale to a specific geographical location, the impression is given that the 'Legends' are from different places in Lincolnshire. However, some of them may have migrated long before Balfour collected them, and provided the first printed 'originals'. Howat also included a complete version of 'Fred the Fool'/'Samuel's Ghost' under the title 'The Wandering Toadman'; in private correspondence, she informed me that she had collected it in the early 1990s from someone in an old people's home in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, who had heard it from his or her grandparent, and who said that the tale's location was Somersham Fen near Chatteris, Cambridgeshire. It is therefore possible that the grandparent knew of the complete tale at the same time as it was collected by Balfour, eighty miles to the north.

In 1995, 'Yallery Brown' became the subject of a piece of musical theatre for children in the Cambridge area. The writer Mick Gowar, of Anglia Ruskin University (then Anglia Polytechnic University) in Cambridge, inspired by the Crossley-Holland version, led a joint project between Bottisham School, the Cambridge School of Art and Anglia Ruskin. BA Illustration students helped the school pupils to create their own digital versions of folk tales

to contribute to the new European Storytelling Archive based at the University. One of these short films, made with Key Stage 2 pupils from Bottisham, named the victim of ‘Yallery Brown’ as Tom, as in the original, but made him a farmer in Suffolk. For the first time, one of the tales collected by Balfour had been moved to a county that does not share a border with Lincolnshire.

However, the ‘Legends’ had not been forgotten in their home county, though they had been appropriated for a different part of it to that in which Balfour had collected them. The short-lived Fenscape: Fens Discovery Centre at Springfields Outlet in Spalding, which opened in 2004 and closed in 2010, included a wonderful narration in Lincolnshire dialect by famous local actor Jim Broadbent, based on some parts of the ‘Legends’. Then, in about 2005, the Carrlands Project was created by Mike Pearson of Aberystwyth University, and partially restored the tales to the place that, through Balfour’s efforts of recording, had given them to the canon. With the help of two composers, Pearson, who had grown up in the Ancholme valley, explored the local landscape and included some content from the ‘Legends’. The team also produced also original sound compositions inspired by, and set at, three locations in the North Lincolnshire Carrs. The recordings included quotes from Balfour’s introduction along with the story of Tiddy Mun.

At the time that the Fenscape project in Spalding was closing, however, a similar project was being created by the Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service and The Greater Fens Museum Partnership. Called Fenland Stories, it involved community groups, predominantly in Cambridgeshire, working with local museums and a film-maker to produce ‘films retelling traditional tales and modern Fenland myths’. These ‘myths’, which included four of the ‘Legends’, visited fourteen museums in Cambridgeshire as well as Kings Lynn Museum in Norfolk and Ashcoughfee Hall in Spalding. The results of the project, which received

funding from the County Councils and Renaissance East of England, were compiled onto a DVD (Greater Fens Museum Partnership, 2011). The Fenland Stories travelling exhibition contained printed pages from Balfour's 1891 text in *Folk-lore*, displaying Balfour's phonetic dialect text from 'The Dead Hand' along with the statement that 'these dialects were rarely written down, so few survive. The language, like the stories, has evolved over generations.' I was informed that Fenland people could no longer read this dialect, though I have found that it has caused no problems for some readers in North Lincolnshire.

I got involved in looking at the 'Legends' when I was a writer and semi-professional storyteller, about 25 years ago. I used the stories to illustrate the lives and beliefs of the people of the flat landscape known as the Fens, or Fenland, where I lived at the time. It instinctively seemed obvious to me that they had come out of, and therefore belonged to, a land that was subject to flooding, and it did not take me long to discover the origin of the collection of tales as being the flat lands of North Lincolnshire. I also discovered that Marie Balfour, who offered the tales to the world as a collection, had lived in the area for just two years while her husband was employed as the village doctor.

Despite the wealth of successful adaptations and relocations of the 'Legends', which, since they first appeared in print, demonstrate a widespread view that they fit a flat landscape, the folklorist Jeremy Harte, in *Explore Fairy Traditions* (2004), suggested that Balfour created the 'Legends' herself, and that 'they are better than the real' fairy stories (Harte 2004: 20), though he believed that Balfour 'deserves some credit for creating a myth of rural paganism' (19). Acknowledging that content from the 'Legends' had been given at least ten separate entries, including shortened versions of the tales, in Katharine Briggs' *Dictionary of British Folk-Tales* (1969) and *Dictionary of Fairies* (1976), he reasoned that 'The Folklore Society was conducted on ladylike principles in those days' (Harte 2004: 19).

What led Harte to this conclusion? The root of this seems to have been a comment made by F. J. Norton, librarian of the Foreign Books Department of the Cambridge University Library. Some time prior to 1965, Norton had compiled a series of abstracts of English folktales, which he had identified by type and motif numbers. In his notes, now in the archives of the Folklore Society, he writes (in note 331): ‘Unfortunately there seems to be reason for doubting the authenticity of all these Lincolnshire tales. They are certainly curiously remote in spirit and substance from any body of folk stories English or European.’ This curious entry gives little indication of the reasons why there were doubts about all of the ‘Legends’, except that they were different in content from other local tales. Though his comments were disregarded by Briggs, they were picked up by Neil Philip, who in *The Penguin Book of English Folk Tales* (1992), wrote that ‘The Green Mist’ is ‘like Mrs Balfour's other stories ... sufficiently strange, unlike anything else collected even in Lincolnshire by folklorists ... as to raise real doubt as to the authenticity of the material, despite the circumstantial information provided about the narrators’ (Philip 1992: 156). Philip also criticised Balfour's description of the area:

Lindsey was never a discrete social or economic area to sustain such a distinctive and atavistic culture; Balfour's claim to have discovered ... inhabitants ... possessed of such grim and violent imaginations, is not really supported by any other evidence (Philip 1992: 156).

This is easily contested. Despite its proximity to the main Roman road from Lincoln to the Humber, Redbourne remained relatively isolated, mainly due to it being a closed village under the control of the Duchy of St Albans. There is an example of an incident in the school log book of two Redbourne children being punished ‘for falsely reporting having witnessed the murder of a child on their road home from school’ (James: 88). Surely this is indicative of

a violent imagination. This love of grim and violent stories has also been recognised by Mike Wilson in his major study of storytelling and teenagers (1997). It is also noticeable that within the now redundant parish church in Redbourne, there is a highly unusual late Victorian enamelled glass window depicting the Day of Judgement. The parishioners would regularly have seen this image of ‘the sun darkened, the moon turned to blood’, and ‘rocks and mountains falling on cowering human beings’ (Thorold, 1996: 3). It is not surprising that the ‘Day of Judgement’ (not a common folktale motif) is mentioned in both ‘Tiddy Mun’ and ‘Stranger's Share’.

Philip also criticised Balfour's recording of dialect in the Legends, noting that in her 1955 paper Rudkin referred to it as ‘shocking’ (Philip, 1992: 157). Balfour was inconsistent in her recording method. However, digital analysis of the lexicon of each tale, using the *AntConc* computer programme, indicates that the stories were told by different tellers (James: 52). The story structures also indicate that they are from an oral tradition: they include openings and closings, repetitions and patterns, dialogue, rhyming stanzas and couplets, expressive sounds and sound effects, and assertions that the stories are true. The ‘Legends’ also contain much that is straightforwardly connected to Norse folk belief, particularly the Great Worm, the Boggles and Boggards, the offerings left on stones, and the use of the term Yule. This is not surprising when one considers the position of the north of Lincolnshire on the Humber Estuary which enabled trade with other northern European countries, and its medieval legacy as part of the Danelaw.

It can be argued that the ‘Legends’ may once also have been told in the Fens (as indeed they are now), as the landscape of the Ancholme Carrs is similar to that of the more southerly Fenland. The drainage of low-lying and marshy areas in England, which started with Dutch engineers in the seventeenth century in South Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire and then

spread to other geographically comparable areas, including around the Wash, used the same methods. However, the River Ancholme was especially susceptible to inundation, as it has a shallow gradient with a fall of only four metres over its forty-kilometre course. The spring tides that occurred when the moon was new or full were therefore particularly feared in this area. If the Humber could not discharge into the North Sea, it would flood the Ancholme Valley.

Much of the above is of course circumstantial, but in combination it provides strong evidence that Balfour did in fact collect the tales locally, though of course she may have made errors in transcription, or inadvertently added or changed minor details. In workshops and after giving talks on the 'Legends' in North Lincolnshire, audiences often indicate recognition regarding the content of the stories, particularly their darker supernatural qualities. In 2011, a woman who had discussed the Legends with her 89-year-old mother, who lived fifteen miles north of Redbourne in Winteringham, wrote me to say that

My mother has no doubts that the legends originated in the Carrs; the language used, the characters, the plots, were all familiar to her from her childhood...There's always been a belief in my family and families of friends here that "looking forward" to something is somehow dangerous and bodes ill! ... We don't know who it may be but we in the Carrs still have a feeling that someone is listening in the silence of the fields!

Again, this is circumstantial evidence of their 'legitimacy', or at least of their legitimacy as living folk tales told to Balfour. This is not to say that they are not unusual, and it is for that reason as much as any other that some of them have remained salient since they were first brought to wider attention.

Works Cited

Balfour, Marie Clothilde, 'Legends of the Cars', *Folk-lore* Vol. 2, No 2 (June 1891), pp.145-170.

Balfour, Marie Clothilde, 'Legends of the Cars, Part II', *Folk-lore* Vol. 2, No 3 (September 1891), pp.257-283.

Balfour, Marie Clothilde, 'Legends of the Cars, Part III', *Folk-lore* Vol. 2, No 4 (December 1891), pp.401-418.

Briggs, Katharine, *A Dictionary of British Folk-tales in the English Language: Incorporating the F. J. Norton collection. Parts A & B Folk Narrative & Folk Legends*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969.

Briggs, Katharine, *A Dictionary of Fairies*, London: Allen Lane, 1976.

Briggs, K. M. and Tongue, R. L., *Folktales of England*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965.

Crossley-Holland, Kevin, *The Dead Moon and Other Tales from East Anglia and the Fen Country*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1982.

Crossley-Holland, Kevin, *British Folk Tales*, London: Orchard Books, 1987.

Crossley-Holland, Kevin, *Long Tom and the Dead Hand: And More Tales from East Anglia and the Fen Country*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1992.

Crossley-Holland, Kevin, *The Old Stories: Folk Tales from East Anglia and the Fen Country*, Cambridge: Colt Books, 1997.

Fenscape Project, 'The Legend of Tiddy Mun',
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKdmk85kvWM> [accessed 30 July 2025].

Garner, Alan, *A Book of Goblins*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1969.

Garner, Alan, *Collected Folk Tales*, London: Harper Collins, 2011.

Harte, Jeremy, *Explore Fairy Traditions*, Loughborough: Explore Books, 2004.

Howat, Polly, *Ghosts and Legends of Lincolnshire and the Fen Country*, Berkshire: Countryside Books, 1992.

Howat, Polly, *Tales from the Misty Fen*, audio cassette (1994).

Jacobs, Joseph, *More English Fairy Tales*, David Nutt, 1894.

Lupton, Hugh, *Tales of the Fens*, audio cassette (1989).

Philip, Neil, *The Penguin Book of English Folk Tales*, London: Penguin, 1992.

Rudkin, Ethel, 'Folklore of Lincolnshire: Especially the Low-lying Areas of Lindsey',
Folklore, Vol. 66, No 4 (December 1955) pp.385-400.

Thorold, H., *St Andrew's Church, Redbourne, Lincolnshire*, London: Churches Conservation Trust, 1996.

Wilson, Michael, *Performance and Practice: Oral Narrative Traditions Among Teenagers in Britain and Ireland*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997.