

*A review of*

## The Nail in the Skull and Other Victorian Urban Legends

B.C. Kennedy

**T**his volume contains 70, largely forgotten, Victorian urban legends. Urban legends are, the author suggests in his historical overview in the 'Introduction', belief narratives recounted as if they were true stories, that is, stories that readers or listeners are expected to believe. However, while the reader or listener may wonder about the truth of the story, the connection throughout is belief, even if there is rejection or mockery.

While the author acknowledges that the phrase 'urban legend' is far from ideal, it is a familiar term to the public, and to scholars outside of folklore studies. An alternative term among folklorists is 'contemporary legend', but this has unfortunate ambiguities that are not in keeping with the timeframe of this volume. Urban legends touch on extreme or difficult aspects of life: crime, death, illness, sex, the supernatural and war. In Victorian Britain, they frequently involved troublesome, informal social institutions and anxieties over new technologies (bicycles and railways), as seen in 'Drugged on a Train', and social changes – for example, the enfranchisement of Catholics depicted in 'Covert Catholics'.

The aim of this book is to bring together a sample of these Victorian urban legends. Some are relatively well known, such as 'The Bosom Serpent', 'Human Sausages', 'Fish Ring' and the 'Mistletoe Bride', and indeed, 10 of these 70 stories have already been assigned folklore motifs. The remaining 60 stories, for example 'Chimney Boy' and the "Wrong Bed"', are unfamiliar as they were not collected or studied in Victorian times and they have not, for the most part, been collected or studied since.

Simon Young categorises the legends into three different groups in terms of origin. First, there are narratives from Victorian Britain and Ireland, then narratives from the British Empire and its dominions, for instance 'Harem Prisoner'. Finally, there are the stories from elsewhere which were enjoyed in Victorian Britain, the two most popular locations being the United States and Paris.

While researching this book, Young assessed the various forms of media by which the stories were passed along. Newspapers, he writes, are the most important sources for urban legends in 19th-century Britain due to the international connections of the British Empire at that time. In addition, the British Newspaper Archive (BNA) – which was created on the back of the British Library's extraordinary newspaper collections for Britain and Ireland – is an impressive database. Young does not try to analyse the urban legends, but rather offers them as a list of 19th-century stories as many are new discoveries. In the Introduction, Young assesses the impact of oral and print culture in Victorian times, emphasising the strength and importance of oral transmission as demonstrated in stories such as 'Beetle Eyes' or 'Child Pie'. He lists the different types of oral transmission: rumours, storytelling, street-criers, confessions (religious or otherwise), speeches, sermons, songs and plays. What makes Victorian transmission of stories different to previous centuries is its written, particularly printed, dimension. The reading revolution that took place in Victorian times due to the rapidly growing literary levels, the greater availability of printed material and its affordability, had important implications in the perpetuation and preservation of these urban legends. The stories collected in this volume were not just told orally but were also written about in letters, broadsides, chapbooks, song-sheets, school primers, comics, catechisms, novels, short stories, magazines, advertisements and, of course, newspapers.

Fairy tales such as 'Rapunzel' are framed in terms of plot, vocabulary and the locations employed, for example, 'once upon a time', but this is not true of urban legends, which often passed themselves as news, experiences and sometimes bizarre anecdotes in the Victorian magazines, newspapers, and even book footnotes. The reason for this omnipresence is, Young suggests, an economic one. As the print markets became less expensive in the 19th century, it became easier for urban legends to find their way into print; they were used actively to sell publications as their egalitarian nature appealed to all strata of Victorian society. In tales such as 'The Wrong Bed' or 'The Wrong Trousers', the racy nature of the story acted as a 'filler' to amuse readers of newspapers and magazines while blurring the line between fact and fiction. However, while urban legends involving murder or cannibalism were not difficult to publish, some narratives were deliberately neglected because they were judged too improper due to their sexual nature. Stories such as 'Shoplifter's Dilemma' and 'Hands in the Muff' were published as they did not compromise the publisher: they are effective stories with coded sexual references.

Young explains that there were four general circumstances where belief legends appeared in print: clippings, flaps, individual reports, and inventions. Clippings – the use of a story from another newspaper, such as 'The Corpse in the Cart', has the potential to be read by thousands of readers. 'Sewer Monsters' is an example of a flap – where a newspaper reports an oral story from a local community, which may or may not have

been true. The third category involved people who claimed that they had had an experience that resembled a legend, as seen in 'Chloroformed', while the fourth category are out-and-out inventions, for example 'The Eagle and the Baby'. These four categories could easily merge and become confused, thus creating a print folklore.

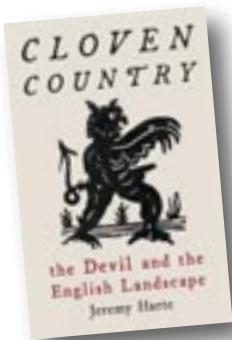
Each urban legend is presented with a preceding short summary, attestation, motif, and secondary literature sources where applicable. 'The Nail in the Skull and Other Victorian Urban Legends' will appeal to anyone interested in this genre due to the rich source of primary material that merits further research. This scholarly book of urban legends is well presented and engaging. Young demonstrates an excellent understanding of Victorian print and oral culture, and his meticulous research is evident in the detailed notes and bibliography provided.

Author: Simon Young.

Publisher: University Press of Mississippi (2022), 227 pp.

---

## B.C. Kennedy



## *A review of* **Cloven Country: The Devil and the English Landscape**

Victoria Leslie

**T**he prospect overlooking the Devil's Dyke in Brighton is the first location engagingly described in Jeremy Harte's tour of English folklore and landscape named after and associated with the Devil. The Dyke itself is actually a valley, and it is the first in a list of geographical features and monuments which are attributed to the work of the Devil (Harte capitalises the 'D' throughout). Enraged by the amount of churches in the vicinity, the tale relates how the Devil hatches a plan to carve a trench through the South Downs to flood the Weald and its inhabitants. But hearing the commotion of the Devil hard at work, an old woman rises from her

slumber and confronts the offender armed with only a sieve and candle. The sight of candlelight through the sieve gives the impression of the sun and, believing it to be day, the Devil flees. As Harte explains, the old woman's cunning in outwitting the Devil is a common trope in stories about the Devil and the English landscape. The fear-inducing 'Satan of prayer' is not the protagonist of these kinds of stories, but instead a 'clumsy ogre' easily thwarted by quick-thinking locals who are able to rise above the threat of evil with clever words or tricks.

The Devil also has ambitions to flood the faith-abiding town of Bewdley in Worcestershire. He confides all to a traveller he meets on the road while carrying a mighty hill on a spade destined to be dropped into the River Severn. But the traveller warns him of his very long journey ahead, and as proof empties the sack he is carrying full of broken shoes he has worn out in walking from Bewdley. The prospect of the long road and the weight of the spade is a sufficient deterrent, and the Devil sets down the hill where he stands. In this case it is a cobbler carrying the items of his trade who is to thank for saving the town from the floodwaters. The Devil's Spittleful ('spittleful' is Worcestershire dialect for 'spadeful') is therefore the name given to the hillock sitting incongruously in the countryside on the edge of the Wyre Forest.

As Harte explains, any peculiarities within the landscape could be ripe for association with the Devil. Likewise, similar geographical features and combinations of features (in this example, a hill a short distance from a town and a river, and a road where an encounter of this kind could take place) allow for the tale to be transplanted to new environs relatively easily, oftentimes with diverse variations. For Harte, folklore is 'not a tree but a lattice' where stories and their motifs are constantly entangled. So, it is not surprising to learn that in one variant the hill in question is not made of earth but comprised entirely of the cobbler's shoes which are left behind as he flees his adversary, in this case a giant instead of the Devil.

In fact, tracing these stories back further reveals that they were often concerned with giants and ogres, capable of manipulating the landscape with their superhuman size and strength. Further proof is given with reference to a branch of place names and their associated stories known as the *Devil's Apronful* which appear in a variety of different locations from Barden to Clitheroe. The kernel of the story centres on the Devil's apron-strings breaking under the weight of the stones being carried within its confines, leading to the formation of a monument as they descend. As Harte points out, an apron is an unusual garment of choice for the Devil since he is neither 'farrier [n]or Freemason', but earlier stories linked to a giantess hurling stones at her spouse mid-argument – with the apron forming part of her domestic attire – appear to make more narrative sense. Similarly, stories of the Devil being restricted to carrying out his diabolical work by night and being easily vanquished by an artificial dawn could be seen to be more in keeping with tales of trolls, who once touched by sunlight are transformed into the landscape as stone or dust.

It seems that between the 16th and 18th centuries, the Devil steps into the shoes of several pagan foes who once held dominion over the English landscape. Harte attributes this to the burgeoning tourist industry, where local legends added flavour to popular destinations and in turn were inspired by the traditions of the Grand Tour and the endeavours of 'gentlemen amateurs' to record and sometimes versify the legends they encountered. Along with stories, the creation of features inspired by the Devil became part of a landowner's portfolio, and a Devil's Bridge or Devil's Grove became a stable addition to grottos and follies popular within landscape design.

Other Devil's Bridges found within local lore present the Devil as intent on building rather than destroying, but always motivated by nefarious ambitions. In a tale from the village of Kirkby Lonsdale, the price of building a bridge across the river Lune to allow cattle to graze on the other side is the soul of the first creature to cross it. Yet again, a wily local, accepting the offer, tricks the Devil by sending her dog across the bridge as a requisite sacrifice. In some versions, the dog escapes hellfire, while the bridge is cursed, its stonework prone to collapsing until it is paid for properly with 'human life'.

*Cloven Country* is a comprehensive and erudite guide to the tale types and place names associated with the Devil in the English landscape. Harte is adept at not only situating the Devil in the landscape but placing the reader within the locations described. With the flavour of a travelogue, each chapter begins with extended account of a place branded by the Devil but recognisable to modern readers through references to motorways, museums and tourist attractions. The result is an engaging and entertaining tour of the English landscape through its changing scenery and stories.

Author: Jeremy Harte.

Publisher: Reaktion Books (2022), 336 pp.

.....

**Victoria Leslie**