

A review of **The Castle of Truth and Other Revolutionary Tales**

B.C. Kennedy

Jack Zipes has edited and translated this collection of radical political fairy tales by Hermynia Zur Mühlen (1883-1951) – some translated from German into English for the first time. With an extensive and formative introduction by Zipes and period illustrations by George Grosz, John Heathfield, Heinrich Vogeler and Karl Holtz, *The Castle of Truth and Other Revolutionary Tales* revives the legacy of one of the 20th century's best authors of this genre.

Hermynia Zur Mühlen was an unconventional figure. Disobeying all the rules that were part of her Austrian aristocratic upbringing, she 'betrayed' her class and became one of the most outspoken and prolific left-wing authors of the early 20th century, seeking to revolutionise children and adults through her provocative fairy tales. Forbidden by her father to become a schoolteacher, she married an Estonian count against her parents' will in a desperate attempt to become independent from her family. Following nine unhappy years and ill health, Zur Mühlen moved to Davos in Switzerland, where she flourished. There she met Stefan Klein, an Austrian translator who shared her political views and interests in literature and became her lifelong partner.

Zur Mühlen was particularly excited by the October Revolution (1917), and it was around this time that she began to reflect and write about the trivial and demeaning literature for girls and how children's literature played an important role in the socialisation of young people. This was part of a growing movement in Europe, and she was not alone in reinvigorating the fairy tale with socialist and communist cultural ethics; in France, for example, Paul Vaillant-Couturier's *Jean sans Pain* (1921) was written for children to 'know more about social injustice and the people and forces that produced wars'.

Zur Mühlen's first major pioneering work was in the realm of fairy tales. In 1921 she published *What Little Peter's Friends Told Him*, using six different household objects that come to life to tell Peter's stories of the difficult lives of working-class people. Peter had broken his leg and had to remain alone at home while his mother worked in a factory. Compared to the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann and Hans Christian Anderson, who also created talking objects, Zur

Mühlen was much more explicit in relating the objects to the exploitation of workers. Three of these stories make up the opening tale of this present compilation of 17 tales. While the tales are written in a simple, direct style to provide hope, the accompanying pointed and often bleak pen-and-ink drawings by Grosz serve to remind readers that better times are not around the corner.

Zur Mühlen's book became an immediate success and was translated into 10 foreign languages. She continued her experiments with politicising the fairy tale by publishing several other books that dealt with social injustice, discrimination, tyranny, deception, and the significance of solidarity among members of the working class, all themes prevalent in this collection.

However, her world kept changing. When the Nazis took over the German government in 1933, Zur Mühlen and Klein left Frankfurt for Vienna. Following the annexation and occupation of Czechoslovakia, the Kleins – now married – emigrated to England in 1939 where Zur Mühlen remained until her death in 1951.

There was a major change in Zur Mühlen's ideology during the 1930s and 1940s. Where she had formally placed her faith in the Communist Party to spearhead the way to a socialist future, she now placed her faith in religion, and this is reflected in her later writings which place a greater focus on spiritual belief. The fairy tales selected for publication in this book stem primarily from Zur Mühlen's radical Weimar years and are intended to provide a comprehensive view of the innovative techniques that she used in her tales to provoke and raise the political consciousness of her readers. In contrast to classical fairy tales, her focus was constantly on the plight of the working class under capitalist conditions that had to be changed to create greater social justice.

Perhaps the most significant of the tales is 'The Castle of Truth' with its strong autobiographical element. In this tale a beautiful young woman from the working class is exposed to the rays of truth from an indestructible castle and consequently she realises how brutal the elite class is and that she has made a mistake by marrying a wealthy baron. When she relates her experiences to his upper-class friends, who are like sinister beasts, she is sent to an insane asylum. However, the castle becomes a beacon of true light that exposes the criminality of the ruling class. Typical of all the tales in this collection is the open ending. Zur Mühlen did not believe in the happy ending of classical fairy tales. The endings are intended to provoke and incite readers to political action. In 'The Glasses', readers are encouraged to rip off the glasses that blind them from the truth. In 'The Servant', readers learn that they must share the means of production – that is, the machines – to serve the people and not just the ruling class.

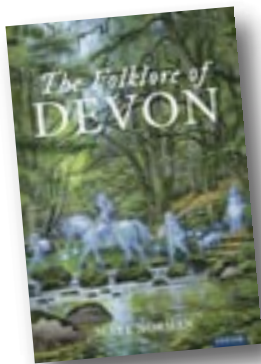
In 'The Carriage Horse', the workhorses organise a union to resist exploitation and bad living conditions, and in 'The Broom' a young worker learns how to sweep away injustice with a magic broom. Zur Mühlen does not mince her words, just as another of the illustrators, Karl Holtz, does not hold back from depicting the devastating conditions under which many people lived and suffered in the Weimar Republic. Perhaps the most moving tale is 'The Red Flag', named not because of its association with the Russian revolution but because it is the flag

soaked in the blood of murdered refugees on an island ruled by a tyrant. It is this flag that unites different groups of exploited refugees to realise how much they have in common and to rebel. This was a tale written when Zur Mühlen was losing faith in the Communist Party and when Nazism was on the rise in Germany. She did not rewrite or modernise fairy tales such as 'Little Red Riding Hood' to explain to her readers how to combat fascism. There are no princesses or princes in her tales or happy weddings. The sources of her stories were the injustices that she viewed throughout Europe and the courage of people deprived of humane living conditions. It is striking to see in Zur Mühlen's unusual fairy tales how much she valued international co-operation of working people as the basis for the eradication of injustice and class systems. We are indebted to Professor Zipes' scholarly translation of these tales for reawakening the superb legacy of Hermynia Zur Mühlen's work.

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A review of
**The Folklore
of Devon**

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There is a misapprehension that Devon is especially rich in folklore, but this is not the case, Mark Norman informs us, when compared to other counties in the United Kingdom which are equally full of superstition, tradition and customs, both ancient and modern. However, where Devon excels is how much of its folklore has been recorded and preserved, a practice that continues through the Devonshire Association (founded in 1862), which holds what is thought to be the most valuable collection of folklore in the county today. It is from these records, the author acknowledges, that he draws extensively in certain chapters of this book. The preservation of customs

and traditions across Devon are found in books such as Ralph Whitlock's *The Folklore of Devon* (1977), and by using this self-same title, the author argues that this present book can be considered as 'an expanse of and update to the ethos of Whitlock's smaller book'. I would have preferred an alternative title to distinguish clearly from the original text and to reflect the new subject matter that Norman explores, particularly in his final chapter, 'Modern Folklore', which aims to show how the constant reinvention of folklore continues in our global, technological modern world.

The term 'folklore', coined in 1846 by antiquarian William Thomas, refers to the collected beliefs, customs, and traditions of any community. It has long been the case that customs and superstition are seen as being confined to the uneducated rural classes or the peasantry, an idea propagated by the upper-class Victorian and Edwardian prolific collectors of folktales, fairy stories and diverse curiosities. Nothing could be further from the truth, Norman argues, as 'the placing of the peasantry as sole arbiters of local folklore was misguided'. Indeed, he suggests, those same collectors interacted with the subject themselves and in doing so created new traditions.

The Folklore of Devon is organised into ten chapters, beginning with an account of key folklore collectors who played a significant part in the collection and preservation of folklore material in Devon. The remainder of the book examines the main themes which run through Devon's customs, traditions and beliefs and looks at how they compare with broader examples of folklore in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Devon has a geographical area of approximately 2,589 square miles. Just under 25 percent of this consists of the Dartmoor and Exmoor moorlands. Both these areas bear evidence of human habitation as far back as the Mesolithic periods, and it is no surprise that many folklore stories are attached to these two areas, such as supernatural animals – think of the 'Beast of Exmoor' – legendary characters, wild ghostly hunts and spirits believed to haunt these vast wildernesses. Sometimes it is aspects of the landscape itself, such as water, that take on an identity in folktales. Dartmoor takes its name from the main river which flows through it, the river Dart, which was believed to 'cry'. It was believed that the Dart claims a human soul every year, stemming from old ideas of river deities and sacrifice. However, this superstition is not confined to the Dart, as Norman points out: the idea of rivers requiring one or more souls a year is prevalent throughout the United Kingdom and internationally.

Chapter Three focuses on the calendar customs that play an important role in the largely agricultural environment of Devon, which relate directly to the passing cycle of the year and may be considered as part of the intrinsic cultural makeup of the county. Because Devon is predominantly an agricultural country, the following chapter concentrates on the varied folk beliefs attached to agricultural production, and by association, to the prediction of favourable weather conditions required to undertake them. The author explores several superstitious Devonian beliefs, many of which are now quite obscure, and considers whether, in some cases, there could be a valid meteorological basis.

You don't have to look far in Devon to find traces of legendary visitations by the Devil in the landscape; for example, significant rocks and stones which seem out of place were usually thought to be the work of Satan. In this chapter, Norman urges the use of extreme caution to avoid jumping to conclusions when looking for historical clues within folkloric place names. While there are obvious religious connotations to many Devil stories, there are also comedic tales of him being outwitted by humble villagers. Chapters six to nine focus on specific areas of legend and myth including fairies, witchcraft and hauntings that share many of the common motifs such as changelings, scapegoating, pixy-leading and horse stealing. Norman suggests that the stories of fairies stealing horses at night and riding them hard on the moors may have their origin in the smuggling community as an explanation for why horses 'borrowed' from local owners overnight to move goods appeared exhausted and dishevelled in the morning.

Sightings of ghostly Black Dogs are a worldwide phenomenon, but are most prevalent in the United Kingdom, where virtually every variation may be found. Possibly the most well-known is the Devon-based *Hound of the Baskervilles* from the Sherlock Holmes stories. In Chapter Eight Norman uses this story as a springboard to explore the folklore surrounding the Black Dog as a portent of death, a diabolic version of the devil or as a protective companion. He suggests that some of the folklore sprang from stories invented by smugglers to keep people away from the places in which they were operating, particularly in coastal areas, but at the same time those smugglers also drew on pre-existing folklore when coming up with stories.

The book closes with a chapter on modern folklore. Norman argues that there is a common misconception that folklore relates only to old practices and traditions and has no real relevance to modern life. The internet, he suggests, is creating folklore every day. Described as 'the world's largest unintentional folklore archive', the internet is constantly providing a platform to record and preserve the way that people work within their cultural norms, for example through the making or sharing of internet memes. Folklore not only defines those things that we classify as old and part of a superstitious past. We are, Norman writes, a species that thrives on telling stories. This book provides a comprehensive updated volume of Devonian folklore and is clearly aimed at being the successor of Whitlock's 1977 volume, at a time of a resurgence of interest in folklore in the 21st century.

Author: Mark Norman.

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