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Myths and Symbols in Religion and Folklore

HILDA ELLIS DAVIDSON

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WHAT interest now have folklorists in the remote past before the coming of Christianity in north-western Europe, a time when written records were rare and by no means reliable? We now know that folk customs and traditions of our own times, impressive and barbarous though they seem, cannot confidently be assumed to go back into 'the mists of antiquity', as popular guide-books are apt to phrase it. They probably emerged as recently as the nineteenth century or even later, and may have deliberately been given their present shape by some local antiquary, hoping to bring new dignity and popularity to some rowdy annual get-together. Consequently folklorists now tend to concentrate on the detailed history of recent customs, or on story-telling, jokes and popular practices of the present time which can be recorded on a vast scale by the computer. The tendency to avoid the study of past customs has been strengthened by the attitude of archaeologists. Faced with material from the historic past, they have been most reluctant for the last half-century or so, as Ralph Merrifield put it in *The Archaeology of Religion and Magic*, 'to recognise evidence for behaviour that has no obvious material purpose', if this was not found in a manifestly religious or mortuary context.¹ While accustomed to draw elaborate conclusions as to what those in earlier times ate or wore, or used as tools or weapons, in building, or in industrial or military organisations, they felt unable to comment on, or sometimes even to record, details which might indicate ideas about the sacred, the spirit world, attempts to avert bad luck, or popular rituals in everyday use. This negative attitude towards the interpretation of spontaneous religious practices or beliefs was of course in its turn a reaction against the tendency to assume that popular customs and traditional tales and odd bits of archaeological evidence difficult to understand must reveal glimpses of a well-organised pagan past. Encouraged by Robert Graves and his like, many had envisaged a religion of set festivals and sacrifices with such concepts as the dying god, the naked goddess, the dancing corn spirit, all universally recognised by the folk. Traces of such an attitude remain with us yet, as in the recent case of a new Vicar of Bury,² unnecessarily distressed and agitated by the fear that in allowing a Rose Queen for May-Day to be selected from little girls attending his Sunday School, he would be encouraging a heathen activity, 'firmly rooted', he is reported to have said, 'in pagan fertility rites . . . like dancing round a maypole.' Those better versed in the study of folklore realise that such a dream world of orthodox heathen practices dominating early societies and reflected in fragments of later folklore could not conceivably have existed. It has become evident from the work of anthropologists among isolated and what might seem 'primitive' peoples that their beliefs are far from being fixed and simple; complications have inevitably crept in, either through outside influences or from the rich and complex reactions of the human mind and the creative powers of imagination, inspired by natural surroundings and life lived close to the natural world. We have to remember that those following a slower and simpler way of life were not less intelligent than we are; moreover they probably had far more opportunity and encouragement to use their natural gifts for the creation of symbols and the development of imagination and intuition.

Yet even if the past is a foreign and disorganised country, there will always be those who believe that its study will help us to understand the present, and who find that the thoughts and beliefs of vanished peoples arouse an instant response in us. We are losing much of our spiritual heritage, just as we are losing much of value in the environment, through being too crowded together, with facilities for rapid travel and the easy destruction of lonely and beautiful places; the roots binding us to one region of the earth and to a stable community are fast disappearing. We can recover something of what is lost by finding out more about past ways of living, methods of ritual and worship, and the sense of mystery and of the sacred which is sadly lacking in our present culture. I believe that one way in which this may be done is by means of folklore, in spite of what I have said of the difficulties of finding a direct road to the past by means of popular practices and traditions. The value of folklore was not what I set out to establish when I wrote my recent book on early Germanic and Celtic religion, but as I worked on it, the part which it plays in revealing past beliefs became increasingly clear to me.

The religion in which I am interested is that of the British Isles and neighbouring countries in north-western Europe before the coming of Christianity. The Anglo-Saxons were converted about the 7th century AD, and most of France and Germany and the Netherlands at roughly the same time or somewhat earlier, apart from isolated groups like the East Prussians. But for some centuries the Scandinavian countries remained outside the Christian church, in spite of attempts of monks from Britain and determined characters like St. Anskar to bring them into the fold. Iceland, the independent freestate established as a settlement from Norway, accepted Christianity by agreement in or about the year 1000 AD, as the result of a brave decision by a wise Law-Speaker, who was not a Christian, to prevent the country from being torn apart by two opposing systems of law. The other Scandinavian countries accepted the new faith at about the same time, Sweden latest of all. I began my study of the old religion in Iceland, since here we have a unique opportunity to see what happened when northern pagans moved into an empty land and established themselves there far from the holy places and ancestral graves of their former homeland. We are lucky where Iceland is concerned, for while we know very little of the conversion of Denmark and Sweden, and not much about that of Norway, the Icelanders, once they had taken to writing on parchment, kept very full records of all they could remember about the Settlement, telling how it came about and what had been told of their individual family histories. When they came to compose the superb Family Sagas of the thirteenth century, things did not look as hopeful as they had at first, and they began to look back on the early days of the freestate as a kind of golden age, with leaders larger than life. These Family Sagas must on the whole be viewed as historical novels, only occasionally providing reliable memories of paganism, but the Icelanders also reached a very high standard in keeping historical records and preserving past traditions. In the *Book of the Icelanders* by Ari the Learned, and the much longer *Book of the Settlement*,⁴ which lists all the people who settled round the coast of Iceland with various pieces of gossip and information about many of them, we have a chance to see what was remembered of the time when there was no Christian church and the law was based on the worship of the gods. The Icelanders took immense pains to build up a good law system, the details of which are sadly lost because it was never committed to writing but stored in the memories of a succession of gifted Law-Speakers, and this was respected as the supreme authority. I turned to Iceland, then, to see what appears to have happened when a body of Scandinavians, many of them of proud and even royal ancestry, set about building their religion in an island where there were no previous traditions or communities to influence or oppose them.

The religion which they had practised in mainland Scandinavia was not highly organised by any powerful central priesthood. Like many religions where there is no written literature of sacred books to which to appeal, it grew up around certain centres for local communities, holy places and points of assembly; it was served, but not necessarily organised, by priests who officiated at sacrifices, together with local seers and diviners and poets who were closely associated with the ruling family. The king and no doubt the queen also played an essential part, and were closely linked with the cults of the gods and goddesses. The burial mounds of royal personages and of the ancestors of leading families were themselves religious centres, and the choice and acceptance of a new king was a ceremony of tremendous importance, as was also a royal funeral. However, when the little ships began coming out to Iceland in the Viking Age, from about 870 AD, the men who sailed in them had to abandon the idea of a king, although many could trace their descent from a royal line; to choose a new king or jarl would mean either presenting a rival to the king of Norway or accepting a ruler of his choice. They were resolved to be independent, but realised that without the support and co-operation of Norway the commonwealth would not survive. So we can picture them arriving in a land with no holy places, no ancestral tombs, no ruling dynasty to preside at the annual feasts to the gods; with the aid of the records they left, it is possible to discover a certain amount about how they set about establishing a religious system there.

The first necessity was to find holy places which would serve as links with the Otherworld; the second was to set up shrines to the gods like those left behind, where sacred treasures might be kept, such as the ring on which oaths were sworn and perhaps wooden figures representing the gods they worshipped; certain families had their favourite deities and wanted to establish their cults in Iceland. The third was to organise annual feasts at certain points in the agricultural year, when regular sacrifices were made to the gods as a group. The fourth was to establish a harmonious relationship with the spirits of the new land, closely linked with the earth and water of Iceland itself. The cults of the main gods, such as Thor and Freyr, could be brought over the sea, but they recognised that there were now many new spirits with which it was essential to be on good terms. Fifthly, in order to carry out these intentions, a system of law had to be accepted under the protection of the divine powers; since they had no single ruler, but a kind of autocracy, the law itself had to be regarded as the supreme authority in Iceland. These points are clearly made in the records which have come down to us, and in this case the recorders would have no particular inducement to manufacture false evidence; on the contrary, Christian chroniclers might well have been tempted to suppress such matters. However, the Icelanders were so proud of the freestate which they had created that they preserved all they could, overcoming possible Christian prejudices. Moreover, since these historical records are not examples of brilliant story-telling, like the Family Sagas, they are not likely to be influenced by the artistic intentions of the writers or by the influence of foreign literature.

We have a vivid example of the choice of a holy place in traditions preserved about an early settler called Thorolf, who came from western Norway. He was evidently a man of some importance and had had a shrine for Thor on the island of Móstur from which he came. The account of his arrival in Iceland has been preserved in *Eyrbyggja Saga*, probably composed at the Augustinian House at Helgafell, one of the intellectual centres of early Christian Iceland, and there seems no reason to reject the local traditions about Helgafell as late inventions. We are told that when Thorolf came to Iceland, he brought with him the two main pillars from his temple of Thor in Norway, throwing them into

the sea as he neared the coast and noting where they came ashore. It was there that he took land, using the same pillars for the little temple built near his house, probably about where the church now stands, and named it Helgafell, 'Holy Hill'. Close to this spot there is a small rocky knoll which in shape resembles a small burial mound and is roughly shaped like a house at one end; this hill forms a natural landmark, which in the clear Icelandic air can be recognised many miles away. From the top there is one of the most magnificent views I have ever seen, extending on a clear day over a vast area of bright sea studded with islands, with a winding coastline and mountains and glaciers on the inland side. It is as though the world were spread out beneath, and it is still an uninhabited world, with little sign of man. This hill Thorolf is said to have recognised as a place of extreme holiness. No pollution was to come upon it, and no violence committed to either man or beast. No one was to look upon it unwashed; this might sound like a meaningless prohibition, since the hill can be seen from so many points along the coast, but the verb used, *lita*, is found elsewhere with the meaning of turning towards something with deep attention, as in prayer or supplication. Thorolf is said to have declared that after death he and his family would pass into the hill, so that this rocky outcrop was evidently regarded as a way of entry into the Otherworld. I would think it possible that the hill was chosen in the first place because of the sense of infinite space which it affords, and secondly on account of its likeness to a huge burial mound, like the great royal tumuli of Norway and Sweden. The resemblance to a house from one angle emphasises the idea of a place of dwelling for the dead.

The story is told in the saga of how a son of the first Thorolf, called Thorstein, who succeeded his father at Helgafell, was lost at sea while still quite a young man. Before the news reached the family, a shepherd out at night saw the rocky hill standing open with fires burning within, and heard the noise of merrymaking and men drinking together. He thought he saw the dead Thorstein welcomed along with his crew, who had drowned with him, and led to the highseat opposite his father. Thorolf, the father, had in fact been buried in a mound some distance from Helgafell, but local tradition preserved the memory of the holy place he had chosen for himself and his family. This tradition is an excellent example of local folklore associated with an enduring landmark and therefore unlikely to be forgotten. I find it also illuminating as an indication of how men chose out holy places, and then fitted such traditions into the background of the cults of the gods and concepts of the Otherworld. Early writers who observed the practices of both Germanic and Celtic peoples tell us frequently that their sacred places were out of doors, without buildings or even figures of the gods, on hills or in forests, and in Helgafell we have an instance of this in the last period of paganism.

I mentioned the organisation of sacrificial feasts as one of the necessary obligations of the settlers who came to Iceland. This was of enormous importance to both Germans and Celts, and both peoples had a similar calendar based on focal points of the agricultural year. The year in Iceland was divided into two periods, winter and summer, and began with the winter period. The most important feast was at the beginning of winter when the New Year began, at the end of October, and was known as the 'winter nights'. This was a time of danger, since it was the transition period between the old year and the new, and, as at the time between the death of a king and the inauguration of his successor, there was the fear that the forces of chaos might regain the upper hand if the contract with the divine powers were not renewed. It was a time also when divination took place, linked with the sacrifices, when the future of the community and of individuals in the coming year might be revealed by various rituals or seers who could foresee what was

to come. It is easy to see how this feast, which in Celtic countries was celebrated at the same point in the year, on November 1st, and known as Samain, has left its mark on folklore. The festival which we know as Hallowe'en, which as its name indicates came to be linked later with Christian saints and the Christian dead, remains a time in both the Germanic and Celtic areas of the British Isles when there are protective rites against the powers of evil and destruction, and when consultation of the future takes place by various simple divination rituals. This is now carried on largely by children or as a jest by adults, but there is no doubt that here we have continuity of a sort, not of any one specific custom but of the established pattern.

Sacrificial feasts might also take place in early spring, at the time of the first sowing at the beginning of February, when men were getting ready for the fishing season and for military campaigns and viking raids as well as for work on the land. Another important time was the beginning of May which marked the opening of summer; this was the time for various rites to ensure fertility for the animals and to bring a good harvest. There might also be a feast at midsummer or the beginning of August, celebrating the first fruits of harvest and sacrificing for victory. To honour the gods at these times, share the feast with them and look to them for support, was felt to be essential for the continued existence and good fortune of the community, and for success over rival tribes (although this did not apply in Iceland), as well as prosperity on the farms and with hunting and fishing. The imagery of the feast left an enduring mark on Scandinavian and Celtic poetry and art. We have the symbol of the cauldron of plenty and immortality, represented by that in which the flesh of the sacrificial animal was cooked, of which the king was bound to partake along with all the rest. We have also the ale or mead of immortality and inspiration, the drink of the undying gods; the drink hallowed at the earthly feasts was brewed with certain rites, and toasts drunk to the divine powers in certain fixed words. The king had to hallow the food and drink, but in Iceland this was the duty of the man holding the office of *goði* in each district. This was an Icelandic title given to those with special responsibility in the government of the Commonwealth; the word is linked with that for 'god', and may originally have been used for a priest, but in Iceland it was a largely secular office, except for the organising of the feast for the gods. This may usually have been held in the *goði's* own hall, since outdoor feasts were scarcely possible in the Icelandic climate. The concept of the feast in the Otherworld was a powerful one, and not difficult to link later with the Christian concept of the heavenly banquet. It may be sensed behind such customs as that of placing drinking vessels, plates of meat, and sets of dishes in pagan graves, and one particular development was the tradition of Odin feasting dead kings and heroes in his hall of Valhalla, a concept halfway between religion and folklore. A whole genre of Norwegian literature, the memorial poems for the dead recited at the funeral, in which the dead king was described as entering Odin's hall and receiving a welcome there, developed out of the symbol of the feast, while in Gotland there were tombstone representations of a dead warrior riding into the Otherworld to be welcomed by a valkyrie with a horn of mead. Similarly we find numerous legends of feasting in the fairy hill in Irish tales of the people of the *Síd*, with constant reference to roasted pigs and cauldrons of drink that never give out.

As for the animals used for the feasts, these were ideally, among warriors, the boar, the bull and the stallion, sometimes hunted specially for the feast, but on everyday occasions simply pork, beef and horseflesh. These animals provided much symbolism in early art, and the symbolism extends to legends of Otherworld creatures, cattle, pigs and horses coming out of lakes or the sea, or in Norway out of the mountains, or fierce

boars of enormous savagery which devastated the countryside, as in the Welsh *Mabinogion*, offering a challenge to heroes, and a chance for youths to prove their manhood. Hunting legends abounded in the Middle Ages, but these have gradually lost their force during later centuries. However, cattle from the lakes and bulls from the sea continue to play a part in local legends in Iceland, Denmark, Wales and Scotland up to our own times.

The calendar, the set feasts and the cults of the gods were regulated by the law of Iceland, regarded as something sacred. The place of assembly (called the *Thing*) was a holy one under the gods' protection, which all freemen could and should attend. At the Althing or main assembly for all the island, part of the law was recited every year. This was established soon after the first settlers arrived, although at the beginning they were content with small local assemblies. The Icelanders went to great trouble to organise this, sending a man called Ulfljot to Norway where his uncle, Thorlief the Wise, was one of the outstanding lawmen. With his uncle's help Ulfljot drew up and stored in his memory a new code of law for the freestate, based on that of the Gulathing in Norway. He was away for two years, and when he got back his brother Grim journeyed round Iceland searching for a suitable site where men from all parts could meet yearly for two weeks at midsummer. He found a truly magnificent one at Thingvellir. This is in south-east Iceland, but can be reached without too much difficulty from all parts of the island, especially as there is no darkness at midsummer, and there was plenty of room on flat ground for men to set up tents and grass for grazing their ponies. Thingvellir is another numinous place, formed by a huge crack in the earth, the result of volcanic activity. This gave it a symbolic link with the underworld, while at the same time there is a feeling of being open to the sky and the changing and often violent weather, the realm of Thor, skygod and also protector of law and order. A line of jagged rocks offered a sounding-board for speeches and the reciting of the law, and places allotted to the Law-Speaker and other leading men can still be made out. Such sites, with no evidence for early buildings or even enclosures, show how closely early religion was linked with the land itself, and how it was the earth, rocks, waterfalls and hills which were themselves sacred. Local folklore of later times is based on just such awareness of the land, and the influence of outstanding landmarks and natural phenomena, such as Glastonbury Tor or the Green Chapel in Derbyshire, is of primary importance in inspiring legends and keeping them alive. The law which was the supreme power in Iceland was seen as part of the created order set up by the gods; to break an oath sworn in the holy place of assembly or to infringe the sanctity of a court where a case was being heard by violence or weapons (though this certainly happened from time to time) was to arouse the wrath not only of Thor the guardian of order, but that of the spirits of the land as well.

These land-spirits were clearly of great importance for the early settlers, and it is in them that we see most clearly the link between pre-Christian beliefs and traditions and those of later folklore. There are a number of tales of how the early settlers established a relationship with the land-spirits, sometimes called rock-dwellers, elves or giants, and how these usually benevolent beings gave them help against more ominous spirits known as evil *vaettir*, frost-giants or trolls. We are told, for instance, of three brothers obliged to move their farm not long after they came to Iceland because of a flow of lava, such as is common there, in which they lost most of their livestock. But one night one of them had a momentous dream, which was to change their fortunes.⁶

One night Bjorn dreamed that a rock-dweller came to him and offered to enter into partnership with him, and it seemed to him that he agreed. Then a he-goat joined his goats, and his livestock increased so rapidly that he was soon prosperous, and after this was known as Goat-Bjorn. People with second sight saw how all the land-spirits followed Goat-Bjorn to the Thing, and followed his brothers, Thorstein and Thord, when they went hunting and fishing.

Goat-Bjorn was held in considerable respect, and many distinguished Icelanders, including bishops and lawmen, traced their descent back to him. Clearly there was no feeling that it was improper to have dealings with the land-spirits; at the same time it is unlikely that such traditions would be deliberately invented about a revered ancestor by Christian descendants.

Beliefs in land-spirits can be traced to various localities. There was Bard of Snaefell in western Iceland, for instance, of whom many tales were told.⁷ He was said to teach law and genealogies—two important branches of knowledge linked with the gods and the wisdom of the Otherworld—to youths who visited him in his cave beyond the glacier. He was described as a tall figure in a grey cloak and hood with a belt of walrus hide, carrying a spiked stick to help him over the ice. A set of similar tales was told of the giant Dofri in Norway, said to have fostered and educated the celebrated pagan king Harald Fairhair in his youth,⁸ and folklore about this region and its trolls, as they were later called, was used by Ibsen in *Peer Gynt*. Other supernatural beings were said to inhabit waterfalls, and one settler was reported to throw offerings of food into the fall near his house, with the result that his sheep prospered greatly, for the spirit gave him good advice as to which beasts to slaughter in the autumn.⁹ There is another rather sad tale of a farmer who made offerings to a spirit who dwelt with his family in a large stone on his land. This tale is found among traditions of the conversion,¹⁰ and it is significant that in one version the spirit in the stone is called *ármaǰr*, and the other *spámaǰr*. *Ármaǰr* means 'harvest-man', no doubt because the spirit brought harvests, and *spámaǰr* 'someone who foretells the future', and this spirit, like the one in the waterfall, gave good advice as to what was going to happen, appearing to his human partner in dreams. The farmer described how he helped:

He tells me beforehand many things which will happen in the future; he guards my cattle and gives me warnings of what I must do and what to avoid, and therefore I have faith in him and I have worshipped him for a long while.

But in spite of the farmer's protests, the bishop tormented the unhappy spirit with prayers and holy water, until he and his family wasted away and were at last forced to leave, lamenting bitterly.

Such spirits are never represented as accompanying the settlers to Iceland, but apparently belonged to the land itself, although the cults of the great gods, like Thor and Freyr, might be imported from Norway. Nor could they have been spirits of the helpful dead, since there were as yet few dead in Iceland, and the spirits were innumerable: 'All the mountains and hills were filled with land-spirits, some great and some small', we are told.¹¹ There is a close resemblance here to the dwellers in hills and mounds in Ireland, the people of the *Síd*, and the 'Underground People' of Denmark. The land-spirits disliked violence, and were offended and angered by it, as they disliked filth: the Icelandic word for excrement was *alfrekr*, 'that which drives away elves'. They continued to be remembered in folk tradition; certain stones in north-eastern Iceland were called 'stones of the land-goddesses' as late as the nineteenth century, and it was held to be unlucky to make a loud noise near them, to let children play there, or to cut the grass round them.¹² However, such spirits could fight in defence of the land if need be. From Bornholm tales were recorded of the Swedes attempting a landing there in 1645,¹³ when only one old soldier was on sentry-duty with no troops within call. But suddenly he heard whispering voices: 'Load and shoot!' they commanded him, and he fired his musket.

Immediately he saw scores of little red-capped men around him holding guns, and they too shot at the Swedes and drove them back to their ships. There are earlier traditions from the Viking Age of a wizard sent over by a Danish king to spy out the land, who was driven out of Iceland by spirits appearing in various guises.¹⁴ When in the accounts of Norse mythology we come across two families of the gods, the Æsir, the ruling powers such as Odin and Thor, and the Vanir, fertility gods and goddesses associated with the earth and the depths of the water, it seems possible roughly to identify the latter with the land-spirits and the elves.

Here I think we can see something of the mysterious process by which folk-beliefs can develop into myths under the influence of poets and story-tellers, and then back into folklore again when the myths no longer form part of the framework of religion and have been replaced by Christian teaching. The concept of the land-spirits can be traced not only in Iceland and Scandinavia, but also in Germany and France and the British Isles. It is even possible to discover how people pictured them in Roman Britain, since they are shown in carvings, mostly on small votive tablets set up in many cases by local British residents in the area around the Roman Wall and in the Cotswolds. These show little figures of hooded men, first listed by Jocelyn Toynbee in the 1950s.¹⁵ It is known that figures in religious art are often depicted in cloaks, and the hood may indicate invisibility.¹⁶ The little beings on the stones sometimes wear short cloaks, beneath which they are either naked or perhaps wear tight-fitting hose, and sometimes have long cloaks going down to their feet; they seem to be male. They are known as the *Genii cucullati*, or Hooded Spirits, because they are so described in one inscription. Sometimes they are in a group of three, and sometimes in company with a female figure who seems to be a goddess of fertility. They hold fruit, such as apples or grapes, or what are thought to be eggs, and occasionally have swords, reminding us of the possibility of the land-spirits prepared to defend their land if need be. The best known example of such hooded figures is probably that of the three in long cloaks and hoods round their faces from Housesteads on the Roman Wall; this was found in what was apparently a small domestic shrine in the native settlement outside the fort, with a humble offering of five denarii under the stone. There is no doubt that some of these delightful carvings are native work, while others have been influenced by Roman religious art. There are also examples of pottery figures of dwarfs which appear to have been produced in the Rhineland; one of these turned up in a rubbish pit at Reculver.¹⁷

The number of carvings of little hooded men has increased since Jocelyn Toynbee worked on them, although few are on view at museums.¹⁸ To see them is immediately to be reminded of the concept of the brownie. The little dwarfs also lead us towards later folklore, and any child familiar with Arthur Rackham or other fairytale illustrators would recognise them at once. It seems likely that today's Garden Gnomes are to be counted among the descendants of the Rhineland dwarfs; these were first popular in Germany, a centre of dwarf tradition, and the earliest examples brought into England were set up in the grounds of Lamport Hall in Northamptonshire about 1879.¹⁹ One interesting point about the Rhineland dwarfs is that they hold rolls of parchment in their hands, apparently a symbol of their power to give information about the future. Such little figures all seem to be guardian spirits, very similar to those described in early Icelandic records, and carvings of the hooded men were in some cases set up in a small house-shrine or somewhere on a farmer's land. Hooded figures are known from the Continent, but there they are single beings, and not as in Britain in sets of three.

Some of the votive stones were destroyed with the coming of Christianity and have been found in pieces in a pit or well. Yet in general these humble spirits seem not to have evoked the full wrath of the church, and they were to live on with considerable vigour and exuberance in folklore, in the form of little supernatural helpers and protectors attached to families, called by a variety of names. That in general use, particularly in Lowland Scotland and northern England, was Brownie, but we have also Robin Goodfellow, Puck, Hob, Lob and other names known to Englishmen in Elizabethan times. They were familiar both to countrymen and Londoners, and there is a wealth of tradition about them. Shakespeare knew them well, as did other Elizabethan dramatists, and kings and queens were amused to recognise them in masques and pageants. Similar figures were known in Celtic areas of the British Isles; in the Highlands we have the *uruisq* and the *gruagach*, in Ireland the *grugach* and the *grogan*, in Wales (where they are rarer) the *bwca* and the *bwbach*, and on the Isle of Man the *fenodoree*. When a meaning can be traced to some of the names it seems to imply a hairy being,²⁰ and in tales and memorates the brownie is sometimes so described, and seems to be naked under the cloak. The Scottish brownie legends are particularly detailed and vivid, and many brownies were said to be attached to the old aristocratic families, although they might also haunt small farms. It was generally agreed that if offended or mistreated they would change their place of abode and find another house and family to protect.

The brownie acted as a guardian spirit, with close links with the animals on the farms, particularly the sheep and cattle; he worked hard out of doors, but was also kept busy in the stable, kitchen and dairy. He seems to have been closely associated with all milk products, helping with butter and cheese making, and in return for all his work he expected a dish of fresh creamy milk in the evening, together with a piece of fresh bread, a bannock or something similar. This was either left on the hearth at night, or in some special spot outside the house; sometimes the milk was poured on to some ancient stone, or in Shetland splashed on the walls of the house. The brownie punished slovenly or lazy maids and farmworkers by slaps or pinches in the dark, and befriended those who worked well by taking on much of the hard labour; outside he helped with mowing, reaping and stacking, herded the sheep and sometimes brought home the cattle or kept them away from the growing crops; inside he helped with the churning, tidied up at night, washed dishes and even helped to serve meals. When his work was done he liked to lie on the hearth or swing on the chain that held the kettle. He helped members of the family; the brownie connected with the Maxwells was said to guide the laird home with his lantern after he had been out drinking.²¹ He helped young girls to meet their sweethearts, and was said to save them from unhappy marriages, according to some of the Elizabethan plays; after all, Puck's work in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is to bring the right lovers together in the end:

Jack shall have Jill,
Naught shall go ill
The man shall have his mare again and all shall go well.

The brownie was also at hand when the mistress of the house was in childbirth. One of the widespread brownie tales is that of him riding through storm and rain to fetch the midwife, when some lazy servant was putting off the journey, and got a good beating from the wrathful brownie for his neglect. The figure of Billie Blin, which seems likely to refer to a hooded brownie, in a number of Scottish ballads is associated with childbirth, and in one ballad he outwits the evil step-mother who is preventing the birth of a son.²²

The most popular tale of all, found all over the British Isles, is that of the brownie leaving when new clothes are provided for him, and many rhymes are recorded as spoken before his departure:

Here's a cloak and here's a hood,
The Cauld Lad o' Hilton'll dae nae mair good!

and so on. This strong reaction to what often seems a generous gesture and desire to show appreciation—in one recent tale from Ireland two old ladies knit a little two-piece suit for their brownie in return for his help with the housework²³—might perhaps be explained by the fact that in earlier days household servants were usually supplied with a livery and farmworkers with a smock by those who employed them. In one tale from northern England²⁴ the servants clubbed together to get the brownie a pair of red trousers and a shirt such as they all wore, and he was furious:

Red breeks and a ruffled sark!
Ye'll no' get me to do your wark.

The same thing happened at Leithen Hall in Derbyshire when the new laird saw a little ragged figure among the servants and gave orders that a proper livery should be provided for him. The brownie declared forthwith that he would be off, sweeping all the luck of the hall away towards the new hall where he would make his home.²⁵ It is clear in the Icelandic tales that the guardian spirits made a contract with the farmers they chose to help, but they could never be regarded as servants. They were the luck-bringers, and the luck must be freely given, and there had to be respect for the brownie's rights and dues, and proper treatment from both master and servants.

I might have chosen other figures in early religion to whom offerings and pledges were made in return for protection and help, but the brownie seems to provide an outstanding example of how the tradition of the land-spirits lived on in later folklore. There were also female guardian spirits, who again in Scotland and Ireland might be attached to aristocratic families, protecting them both at home and in battle, and keeping a special watch over the destinies of their children. Some female guardian spirits were met with in the wild, protecting the deer and other animals, and might be encountered by huntsmen and fishermen. Once more Scotland is the home of many such tales. It is possible to catch a glimpse of such spirits, moreover, in carvings of the Roman period, as in the case of the land-spirits, for we have many groups and individual examples of the Mothers, very popular among both Celtic and Germanic peoples. They are given many names, some of which mean 'Giving Ones' or something similar,²⁶ and they are depicted, often in sets of three, holding fruit or loaves, nursing infants or holding rolls of destiny like the little dwarfs, sometimes accompanied by a small dog or by the prow of a ship, and often associated with wells or rivers or the sea. All the guardian figures could be dangerous if offended; in the northern traditions there were also examples of the 'evil wights', who are found in later folklore as dangerous destructive beings of rivers or lakes, some taking on the form of threatening animals or birds. In Germany there is an enormous collection of local legends associated with female spirits concerned with spinning,²⁷ such as Percht and Frau Holle, who could be both benevolent and menacing. Sometimes they resembled goddesses and sometimes hideous destructive beings; they presided over the spinning rooms where the women and girls worked, and like Elizabethan fairies they rewarded good workers and punished the lazy and slovenly. The spinning wheel and the supernatural woman associated with it has found its way into a number of our familiar fairytales.

However, all this does not mean the kind of continuity from pre-Christian times which is sometimes claimed. We cannot assume an underground religion persisting through centuries of Christian tradition, or that certain practices have been faithfully handed down from remote times before the church was established. I think the emphasis must lie in a different direction. In the time before Christianity, a highly organised religion with a fixed creed and sacred scriptures and a central authority, there must have been a good deal of religious practice and belief on a level similar to folklore, with the same vagueness, reliance on oral tradition and variations according to local surroundings and activities. Such traditions no doubt had long gaps and renewals, sometimes brought back into circulation by a gifted story-teller or tradition-bearer coming into a new district. Poetry and pictorial art played an important part in spreading, elaborating and preserving such traditions and beliefs; we know that in the Viking Age embroidered pictures and wood-carving helped in their distribution. After Christianity was set up, many concepts on a simple level, like those of the household guardian spirits, persisted because they were humble enough to escape condemnation, and also because they held a strong appeal for young and old. To analyse the nature of this appeal is one of the challenging tasks facing the folklorist. While the old gods such as Woden and Thor were renounced and condemned by earnest Christians, the little land-spirits might be tolerated even by scholars and theologians as tales told to children by grandmothers and maidservants, remembered with affection by all but the rigidly puritanical. James I of England was brought up as a strict Puritan, but even he sensed the attraction of the local brownie. Some folk, he remarked, were so blinded 'as to believe that the house was all the sonsier, as they called it, that such spirits resorted there'.²⁸ Similarly Milton's references in *L'Allegro* to tales of the toiling goblin and Fairy Mab are made with warm affection, part of the picture which he paints of the blessed, contented side of life among country folk.

I think one significant point which emerges from this evidence is that it is no longer necessary to view fairy traditions as based on nearly forgotten heathen gods or on the helpful dead. Such concepts played some part, but it seems probable that the folk beliefs of the pre-Christian period were brought into mythology by poets and story-tellers and loosely linked with beliefs in the great gods. When the cults of the gods disappeared, these continued among country people, but by no means only among the peasant class and the uneducated; the strong association of brownies and guardian goddesses with the ruling families in Scotland and Ireland shows that such concepts were familiar in higher circles, and it is significant that in Tudor times they were introduced into entertainments provided for kings and queens. The sacrifices of old times turned into pleasant little gifts, and half-jesting tales about Robin Goodfellow became part of the social background in which the smallest child participated, remaining quite separate from obligations towards the church. The part played by jesting and children's games tends to be underestimated in studies of the old religion; we assume that it was all naive, reverent and serious, though a helpful glimpse of what some of it may have been like can be gained from our present attitude towards Father Christmas, where spontaneous, imaginative concepts of the Gift-Bringer are encouraged and fostered—and, alas, commercialized—by adults.

My chief purpose in my recent book, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, was to see how close the patterns of religious tradition and imagery among the Celtic and Germanic peoples could be shown to be. But in studying the evidence of early poetry and tales of the Otherworld, I found that the evidence of folklore was continually breaking in. Inevitably this has altered according to the changing needs of the times and variation in social customs, but as Ralph Merrifield pointed out in the book I referred to at the

opening of this paper, certain rites persist with great obstinacy, although the beliefs behind them vary as time goes on; he produces plenty of evidence for this from archaeological records. So I would claim that in going back to the past folklorists will not necessarily be led astray into imagining a vague and romantic world of the folk such as never existed. It is cheering that archaeologists are now becoming interested in what Professor Renfrew has called the Archaeology of Mind.²⁹ In the same way the story of early religion in the light of folklore and vice versa may yet prove profitable in leading to a better understanding of the preservation of tradition and of our continuing spiritual needs.

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NOTES

1. R. Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, London 1987, p. 1.
2. *Independent Magazine*, 1 April 1989, 'Up and Down the City Road,' p. 9.
3. *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, Manchester UP 1988; various subjects mentioned are dealt with in more detail in this book.
4. *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* (Jacob Benediktsson ed.), *Íslensk Fornrit*, Reykjavík, 1968. The first of these and parts of the second are translated by G. Jones, *The Norse Atlantic Saga*, 2nd ed. OUP 1986.
5. *Eyrbyggja Saga* 4; 11; J. Mabire, *La Composition de la Eyrbyggja Saga*, Caen 1971.
6. *Landnámabók* (note 4 above) S 329, II 284, pp. 330-31.
7. *Barðar Saga Snæfells*, discussed in H. R. Ellis, 'Fostering by Giants in Old Norse Sagas,' *Medium Ævum* 10 (1941), pp. 70-85.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 79f. The story is found in *Flateyjarbók*, *Þáttur Hálfðanar Svarta* I, pp. 455ff.
9. *Landnámabók* (note 4 above) S 355, II 313, p. 358.
10. *Kristnis Saga* 2; *Þáttur Thorvalds ens víðforla* 2.
11. *Heimskringla*, *Óláfs Saga Tryggvasonar* 33.
12. E. I. G. Turville-Petre, 'A note on the *land-dísir*,' *Early English and Norse Studies presented to Hugh Smith*, A. Brown and P. Foote, ed., London 1963, pp. 196-201.
13. J. M. Thiele, *Danmarks Folksagn*, 1843, II. p. 194; L. Bødker, *Danske Folkesagn*, 1958, pp. 1118-19.
14. See note 11 above.
15. J. Toynbee, 'Genii Cucullati in Roman Britain,' *Collection Latomus* 28, Brussels 1957, pp. 456-69.
16. W. Deonna, 'De Têlespore au "moine Borru": Dieux, génies et démons encapuchonnés,' *Collection Latomus* 21, Brussels 1955, pp. 24ff.
17. F. Jenkins, 'The Genius Cucullatus in Kent,' *Archaeologia Cantiana* 66 (1954) pp. 86-9.
18. H. R. Ellis Davidson, 'Hooded men in Celtic and Germanic Tradition,' to be published in *Cosmos* 5, Edinburgh UP 1989.
19. Information from the Librarian of the Horticultural Society.
20. J. Rhys, *Celtic Folklore*, OUP 1901 [1983] I, p. 288.
21. A. A. MacGregor, *The Peat-Fire Flame*, Edinburgh 1947, p. 54.
22. F. J. Child (ed.), *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, New York 1957, I, p. 67.
23. S. O. hEochaidh, *Fairy Legends from Donegal*, Dublin 1977, p. 21.
24. W. Henderson, *Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties*, Folklore Society 1866, pp. 210-11.
25. R. H. Cromeck, *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song*, Edinburgh 1910, pp. 332-33.
26. J. de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, Berlin 1957, II, 524, p. 293.
27. V. Waschnitius, *Percht, Holda and verwandte Gestalten* (Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien, Sitzungsberichte, hist. philosoph. Klasse 174), (1913-14).
28. King James I, *Demonologie*, Edinburgh 1597, p. 65.
29. C. Renfrew, *Towards an Archaeology of Mind* (inaugural lecture as Disney Professor of Archaeology), Cambridge 1982.