Orkney Folk Tales and Literature

By Tom Muir

The Orkney Islands, which lie just off the northern tip of Scotland, are at the cultural crossroads between the Celtic and Scandinavian worlds. This is reflected in our folk tales. Occupied by the Vikings since around 800 AD, the Pictish population were absorbed into the new culture. This was quite likely a violent assimilation, but the written record is either silent or a later, garbled assortment of folklore and half-forgotten history. Whatever the case, we are left with a mixture of two distinct cultures. Stories found in Scotland and Ireland are blended with those from across the North Sea: Norway, Sweden, Denmark and the North Atlantic islands of Shetland, Faroes and Iceland. Our stories show the connections between countries in the prehistoric and historic eras.

The tales that come down to us today are only the tip of a long-lost iceberg. Condemned by the church as superstition, and therefore the work of the Devil, folk tales lost the important role that they once played in everyday life. They were not only entertainment but warnings to protect you and your family from the dangers posed by the supernatural creatures who inhabited both land and sea. People believed in these creatures as reality and not just the creation of storytellers. Stories also gave the listeners a sense of place and community morality. It is no coincidence that good triumphs over evil in most tales, or that sharing and caring bring their own rewards.

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Brodgar, a Neolithic stone circle, was said to be the remains of petrified giants, who were enjoying their dance so much that they lost track of time and were caught by the rays of the rising sun. The Hills of Hoy, which dominate the islands, were the creation of another giant who was trying to carry away good Orkney soil for his garden in Caithness. The islands themselves, along with Shetland and Faroes, were the teeth of an enormous sea monster killed by Assipattle, a lazy, ash-raking youth, who sailed down the monster's throat and set fire to its liver. The massive sea serpent's body now forms Iceland and its still-burning liver fuels Iceland's volcanoes and hot springs.

These last few stories have a Scandinavian feel to them, especially the story of Assipattle and the Stoorworm. This huge sea monster is a close relation of Jörmungandr, the Midgard Serpent, one of the hideous offspring of the god Loki and a giantess. Like our Stoorworm, the serpent encircled the world and breathed poison over it. In its death throes, the Stoorworm's forked tongue shot up into the air and almost pulled the moon from the sky before crashing down to earth. The explosive descent left a large hole in the surface of the earth that became the Baltic Sea. Armed with this knowledge any Viking child would have had a road map of the Viking lands in their head.

The character of the lazy, good-for-nothing youngest son who lies by the fire, raking through the ashes, is a popular figure in Norwegian folk tales. Askeladden, the ash lad, often wins the hand of a princess, as does our own Assipattle. Obviously, this story came across the sea in a longship.

The Hills of Hoy, a giant's creation

While many tales have their roots in Scandinavia, some seem to originate in Orkney. Selkie stories, seals who can shed their skins and become human for a night, are strong in Orkney, both in story and song. Versions in Faroes and Iceland are likely to have migrated with people who learned the story in Orkney.

Another shared tale has the Devil sitting on a roof beam of St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall, writing the names of people who are sleeping through the sermon. This story also appears in Iceland, only there the story has a demon recording the names of people who are swearing and blaspheming during the church service. Whether this story originated in Iceland or Orkney is not known, but as the minister in the Orkney version was a real person who preached in the eighteenth century, the Icelandic tale seems to be the oldest in this case.

The list of tales goes on to include the fairy folk and trows, who live in mounds and steal newborn babies, replacing them with changelings. These types of stories can be found all over Scotland and Ireland. Fin folk who live under the sea and on floating islands, usually hidden from mortal view, have parallels with the Huldrfolk, the hidden people of Norway. However, I think that there might be an intermixture going on here, with Scandinavian settlers connecting their own beliefs to one that they have just encountered.

The belief in Mermaids was once strong in Orkney, unlike our neighbours in Shetland. It seems that mermaid stories started to spread in Shetland in the nineteenth century as a result of works of popular fiction, while in Orkney it was a widely known tale type. The fact that you often find confusion between mermaids and selkie folk in tales that come from Scotland and Ireland suggests to me that the belief was stronger and older in Orkney, where the two creatures were distinct.

One Orkney tale which must be very old is the Mither o' the Sea. As her name implies, this 'Mother' is a goddess of the sea who has the power to calm storms and to give life to all the creatures of the sea. She rules the sea in the summer months. Her rival is a male spirit called Teran, who rules the sea in the winter. As the year passes the Mither o' the Sea starts to lose her powers, exhausted by her benevolence. Teran breaks his bonds and the two fight, causing the storms that rage during the autumn equinox. Teran eventually wins and the Mither is forced onto the land, to live in exile. Teran unleashes storms, and the fish, crabs and lobsters head to deeper waters. But Teran's violence takes its toll on him and he loses his strength by spring. Then the Mither o' the Sea returns to the deeps to do battle once more, causing storms at the equinox. Teran is defeated and is again bound at the bottom of the sea. And so it goes on to this day.

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that I am aware of. We know the Nordic myths, and the Mither o' the Sea isn't in that pantheon of gods and goddesses. This story has to predate the Christian era, as it would be heresy to claim that there was a goddess who ruled the sea. Making up such a story could spell danger, as the church would come down hard. Even in later years people would have still got into trouble with the church session for inventing such a story. In my opinion, this is a story that dates back to prehistory, although just how far is impossible to know.

As the church tightened its grip over every aspect of people's lives the stories started to be marginalised and spurned. They faded further into nothingness with the death of every old person who knew them. We are greatly indebted to one man for preserving most of our stories. Walter Traill Dennison (1825–1894) was the son of a large farmer in the island of Sanday. He was partially sighted and seems to have spent quite a lot of his time listening to the stories that old people still remembered. Despite his poor eyesight, he kept notebooks, which he filled with stories and old words, fast going out of use. His book of tales, poems and songs, *The Orcadian Sketch Book*, was published in 1880, but it contained only stories of historical people and events rather than supernatural creatures. The one exception is 'The Stown Windin' Sheet' (The Stolen Winding Sheet) about a vengeful ghost searching for her stolen shroud. There is also a witch who conjures up sea fog and phantom ships to lure unsuspecting vessels onto the rocks.

An exhibition was held at the Orkney Museum in 1994 on the centenary of Dennison's death, which led to me gathering his supernatural folk tales for publication. I wrote the exhibition and was later asked by Aberdeen University to give a series of illustrated talks on Orkney folk tales. And so I became a somewhat reluctant storyteller, although I had told folk tales for one-
off events from as far back as 1990. Surprisingly, bringing back the old tales often met with hostility. Older people saw no point in it. 'Why are you bothering wae yin owld dirt?' I was once asked by an elderly Orcadian man. 'Because I like yin owld

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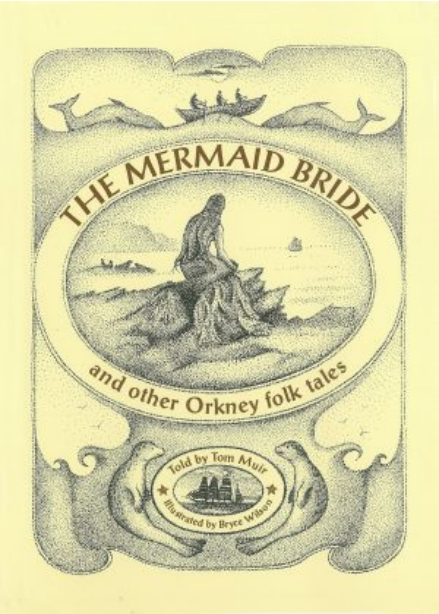

Collaborating with my museum boss, the artist Bryce Wilson, we gathered all the stories that we could find into one book, which Bryce illustrated. The result, *The Mermaid Bride and Other Orkney Folk Tales*, was published in 1998 and is still in print. In 2014 another collection was published as *Orkney Folk Tales* by the History Press, which allowed the stories to reach more people. In that same year, I published the writings and stories of George Marwick (1836–1912) in *Yesnaby’s Master Storyteller*.

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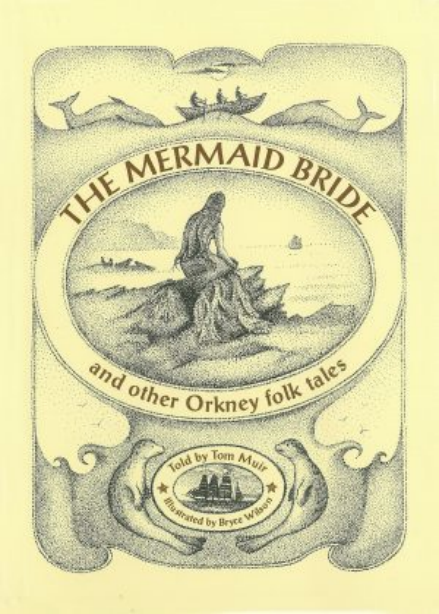

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