

FOLKLORE

by Alison Driver

According to the dictionary I have, folklore is the study of ancient customs, beliefs, traditions and superstitions of the common people. Who are these “common people”? Well, nowadays folklorists would say they are you and me and that we continue to generate folklore, but most people would link folklore to the beliefs and stories of rural people in the olden days. Let’s look more closely at some of Britain’s folkloric traditions ranging from stories of fairies and supernatural beings, to customs and traditional dances.

Tales of the supernatural are common in all parts of Britain. In particular there was (and perhaps still is) a belief in fairies. Not all of these fairies are the friendly, people-loving sprites that appear in Disney films, in some folktales they are cruel and cause much human suffering. This is true in the tales about the Changeling. These tell the story of a mother whose baby grows sick and pale and is changed so much that it is almost unrecognisable to the parents. It was then feared that the fairies had come and stolen the baby away and replaced the human baby with a fairy changeling. This was most likely to happen between birth and the baby’s baptism. There were many ways to prevent this from happening: hanging a knife over the baby’s head while he slept or covering him with some of his father’s clothes were just two of the recommended methods. However, hope was not lost even if the baby had been stolen. In those cases there was often a way to get the real baby back. You could place the changeling on the fire –then it would rise up the chimney, you would hear the sound of fairies’ laughter and soon after you would find your own child safe and sound nearby. Or, if you were more cautious, perhaps there was a magic well in the neighbourhood where you could leave the changeling overnight, and in the morning you would return to find your own baby there without a scratch on him.

Old women also populate folktales, the most famous example is the Banshee. She was a ghost, who was closely connected to a particular family and would sometimes pay them an unwelcome visit. If the family heard her crying or wailing loudly at night, they would know that a member of the family was going to die. Similar to this are the stories of the black dogs. These are definitely not the “man’s best friend” variety of dog. These are enormous, wild dogs seen late at night and they usually meant death or disease in the family for the person who saw them.

Apart from folktales, there are many customs and traditions connected to yearly celebrations which are also part of Britain’s folklore. Lughnasadh (Loo-nah-sah) is a celebration at the beginning of August. This word comes from the Celtic god Lugh, which means light, and it is a time of celebration for the harvest collected. A custom connected with this is to make corn dollies by braiding together corn from the last of the harvest. The dolly is saved until the following spring when it is put back into the earth with the new seeds as it was believed that the dolly contained the spirit of the corn and would bring a good harvest. Christmas too is full of ancient customs which have their roots in times long before Christianity. The traditions of lighting a fire and decorating the home with evergreen come from pagan times. The fire was to keep away evil spirits and fill the home with light and the evergreen was valued because it was a sign that life continued during those cold, dark days.

Not all the origins of ancient traditions are remembered, however. The roots of Morris dancing are not known. This is a dance in which men (and sometimes women) dressed in white dance together - in some styles they clash sticks, in others they wave handkerchiefs. Some people think the dance may be a pre-Christian fertility rite, others say it was introduced into Britain in the late 15th century and that it comes from Moorish dancing. In any case, it is interesting to see that Morris dancing is not a dying tradition, instead interest in Morris dancing seems to be growing and there are Morris dancing groups in places as far away as New Zealand and San Francisco!

Although these tales, customs and dances have been passed down to us from forgotten generations, they themselves have not been forgotten and continue to play a part in our modern lives. Our literature is full of works based on our folktales as in W. B. Yeats’ poem “The Stolen Child”, and even Sherlock Holmes has a close encounter with a supernatural dog in Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Hound of the Baskervilles”. Every week groups of likeminded individuals regularly meet to sing, play instruments or practice ancient dances and this month people all over Britain shall be preparing their homes for that ancient celebration we now call Christmas, lighting fires and putting up holly and mistletoe, just as their great-great-grandfathers once did.