

and a little safer.

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### British Folklore and Superstitions: A Review of Two New Classics

*A Dictionary of English Folklore.* By Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. [Bibliography]. Pp. vii + 411. Paperback. ISBN13: 9780198607663; ISBN10: 0198607660 \$24.00

*The Penguin Guide to the Superstitions of Britain and Ireland.* By Steve Roud. London: Penguin Books, 2003. [Bibliography]. Pp. xxi + 546. Paperback. ISBN: 0140515127. No longer in Print. [Condensed version: *A Pocket Guide to Superstitions of the British Isles.* By Steve Roud. London: Penguin Books, 2004. Hard cover. ISBN: 0140515496. No longer in Print.] Current edition: 2006. ISBN 9780140515121. No US price given.

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Ever wonder when Lady Godiva took her ride? What time of year was-sailing occurred? Why mistletoe was sacred to the Druids? *A Dictionary of English Folklore (DEF)* and *The Penguin Guide to the Superstitions of Britain and Ireland (Penguin Guide)* will answer these questions and many others, as well as providing hours of pleasurable reading for all you Anglophiles out there. Don't let the fun of these books fool you, though; the research behind them is extensive and the authors are experts in their field. Jacqueline Simpson received her doctorate from the University of London in 1980 and has written at least nine books on various aspects of folklore in Britain and Scandinavia. She has served the Folklore Society for nearly forty years, including stints as president, secretary, and editor of the society's prestigious journal *Folklore*. Steve Roud is the Local Studies Librarian for the London borough of Croydon and served as the Honorary Librarian of England's Folklore Society for more than 15 years. He has written several books and compiled many bibliographies on various aspects of folklore and folk songs. (In the interest of full disclosure, I should also say that I have worked on two folk song projects with Steve.) Both authors are highly respected in the United Kingdom, and these two books have received favorable reviews in scholarly journals on both sides of the Atlantic.

Simpson and Roud write with the objective perspective of scholars but always treat the lore itself, as well as its tradition-keepers, with respect. After all, one person's superstition is another person's belief. Their writ-

ing is eminently readable and spiced with a dry sense of humor that gently punctures unproven New Age theories so often promulgated by authors who write about folklore for a popular audience. You have to admire academics who can be entertaining even when correcting what they see as misconceptions, as the following excerpt demonstrates, "While not denying that Celtic influence is probable in certain cases, [we] do not regard it as an automatic explanation for everything eerie, magical, or picturesque in this country" (*DEF*, p. 52).

The authors emphasize accuracy and proof in their articles, proposing theories and offering generalizations only if they have found verifiable historical facts in support of their statements. They don't hesitate to point out what they consider to be errors in the research methods or theoretical perspectives of other scholars, and this willingness to debunk "everyone knows" and "it is said" statements is a major strength of these works. The entry for "Jack-in-the-Green" in the *DEF* serves as a prime example:

The earliest references to the Jack are from the later 18<sup>th</sup> century, but this has not prevented writers extrapolating backwards and claiming him as a true survivor of a wood-spirit, nature worshipper, Robin Hood, Medieval Wild Man ... and so forth, for which there is no evidence but plenty of wishful thinking. Perhaps the most audacious argument-without-evidence was the confident identification of the Jack-in-the-Green with the so-called "Green Man" ... to be found on many churches. This was a mere speculation by Lady Raglan in 1939, which has since been quoted as a fact countless times. (p. 197)

Along with this valuable critical stance, the authors have the ability to bring clarity to sometimes fuzzy definitions of terms used in the field of folklore, to condense complex theoretical arguments into short understandable essays, and to handle controversial figures in the history of folklore collection, scholarship, and performance with sensitivity while not skirting important issues. In the *DEF*, the article on ballads provides succinct definitions that would benefit students of folk song, while articles on the tangled and sometimes contested history of the Folk-Song Society, the English Folk Dance Society, and the English Folk Dance and Song Society provide us with examples of controversial subjects handled by Roud and Simpson with accuracy and tact. Their articles on A. L. Lloyd and Ewan MacColl in the same volume demonstrate a balanced evaluation of the importance of these performer/collectors to the second folk song revival, discussing both how these singer/scholars were viewed during their lifetimes and how scholars

today evaluate their contributions.

Another service performed by the authors is their evaluation of standard reference sources used for research into traditional customs, rating such books as to their reliability and historical accuracy as well as soundness of theoretical perspective. At the end of the article on hill figures in the *DEF*, a short bibliographical note provides a good example of one of these useful evaluative statements:

For descriptions and documentary evidence, see Marples, 1949, though its archaeology needs updating. Paul Newman's *Lost Gods of Albion* (1997) has up-to-date archaeology, but includes far-fetched theories and inaccurate assertions about mythology and folklore. (p. 177)

Simpson and Roud also suggest areas needing further research and analysis—the *DEF* in particular would provide graduate students with a treasure trove of possible topics for theses and dissertations.

Perhaps the authors' most surprising contribution, to those of us who have dabbled in the field but not studied it in any depth, is their correction of the widespread misconception concerning the "ancient" origin of many beliefs and customs found in the British Isles. Indeed, many of the customs we think of as prehistoric in origin are more likely of relatively recent origin... though people living in the British Isles may have a very different picture than Americans do of something being "relatively recent." Examples of superstitions that many of us think of as very old, but that can only be traced back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century or later, include beliefs about both Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> and black cats. Other common misconceptions concern the origins of folkloric figures such as gremlins (which can be documented in written sources only as far back as World War I) and gnomes (which were probably invented by the medieval magician Paracelsus). Even physical objects, such as some of the giant hill figures carved into the turf in England, which many previously thought were prehistoric in origin, are now considered to have been cut first in the nineteenth or even the twentieth century. The romantics among us who can't stand to have our illusions about the ancient customs of the British Isles shattered had better not read these factual and sometimes corrective articles by Simpson and Roud.

Despite the words "dictionary" and "guide" in the titles, the *DEF* and the *Penguin Guide* are really one-volume encyclopedias with alphabetically-arranged articles varying in length from a couple of sentences to three pages. The longest entries tend to be reserved for important and widespread customs and beliefs such as those connected with Christmas, for well-known

folkloric characters such as Robin Hood and Tom Thumb, and for significant collectors and scholars in the world of English folklore, such as Cecil Sharp in dance and the Opies in children's folklore. The authors cover each subject as thoroughly as can be expected in single volumes that attempt to survey so much material, facilitating further study by providing suggested reading lists at the end of most of the articles. In addition, the authors have included substantial bibliographies at the end of each volume. Another useful feature is the provision of typographical conventions to easily track related information: the *DEF* places an asterisk in front of any word that has its own article elsewhere in the book, while the *Penguin Guide* puts words in capital letters to perform the same function.

In the *DEF*, Simpson and Roud not only concentrate on the intellectual history and philosophical trends surrounding folklore and its study in England through the centuries, but also extensively document the lore itself by providing historical facts and descriptions of events, characters, beliefs, and customs. In the *Penguin Guide*, on the other hand, Roud focuses primarily on providing examples of the superstitions themselves, although he often includes information on scholars and theories as well. In both volumes, the authors carefully note differences between the lore of various geographical and cultural areas, as well as between different socio-economic and ethnic groups, and, in contrast to many previous works on English folklore, also trace current usage as well as earliest usage, letting readers see the development of various customs and beliefs across time. In fact, both the *DEF* and the *Penguin Guide* fill a void in the literature by showcasing folklore, beliefs, and customs that are still current, or were within living memory, rather than concentrating on the work done by antiquarians in the seventeenth through early twentieth centuries. Some critics have seen this as a problem, but I believe it to be one of the strengths of both volumes. While any moderately determined student can easily find examples of old customs, it's much more difficult to find documented examples of current beliefs and customs. The chain letter is a good example of a relatively new phenomenon (the earliest specimen found so far was mailed in 1916) that has seldom been considered in works on folklore but is important to study as a demonstration of human cultural and psychological tendencies.

The well-written introductory essays in both the *DEF* and the *Penguin Guide* would be particularly useful as supplementary readings for classes on British folklore. Simpson and Roud brilliantly condense the scholarship and controversy of over a hundred years in their discussion of the definition of folklore in the introduction to the *DEF*, and for those primarily interested in superstitions, Roud's introduction to the *Penguin Guide* defines terms and outlines the historical approaches used in studying this type of lore.

The introduction to the *Guide* also gives the interesting results of a survey Roud and Simpson circulated through the Folklore Society in 1998 to discover the top ten superstitions still current in the British Isles as of that date. By a large margin, “unlucky to walk under a ladder” was the winner. Black cats being either unlucky or lucky came in second, while “unlucky to break a mirror” came in third. Friday the thirteenth, the opening of an umbrella indoors, throwing salt over your left shoulder, putting shoes on a table, passing someone on the stairs, and seeing magpies all rated mention, and touching or knocking wood to ward off bad luck came in tenth. One of the fascinating things about these still-living British superstitions is that many are exactly the same as our American ones while others are completely different, leaving us to speculate about why some changed in their journey to the United States and others didn’t, always an enjoyable exercise for historians and folklorists.

Simpson and Roud also use their introductions to summarize the types of materials they have included in the books, the genres excluded, and the reasons for these particular decisions. The *DEF* covers a broad range of oral and performance genres such as ballads, songs, instrumental music, dance, and tales, along with entries on folklorists and writers who contributed significantly to the collection and study of English folklore (excluding living scholars). The genres the authors were forced to leave out of the *DEF* for lack of space include recipes and food-related customs, sports, games, fairs, and most obsolete customs, as well as children’s lore, fairies, plants, and material culture (i.e., architecture, wood carving, paintings, basket-making, quilts, and so on). Ethnic traditions brought by immigrants who settled in Britain in recent years were also left out. *The Penguin Guide* includes genres such as legends and calendar customs in addition to general superstitions, while excluding weather lore, supernatural beings (fairies, elves, ghosts, etc.), astrology, and witchcraft.

The quality of the writing and the editing standards for both books are so high that I hesitate to mention what few minor problems I encountered—one or two blind cross-references and a few entries that lack cross-references I thought would be useful. On the whole, however, the authors have done a remarkable job of keeping track of their vocabulary and internal references, making their system logical, consistent, and easy to use. Indeed, that Simpson and Roud were able to choose and condense such a huge body of knowledge into such relatively small volumes is a marvel in itself. These books were obviously a labor of love as well as the result of years of dedicated collection and study.

I strongly recommend both *A Dictionary of English Folklore* and *The Penguin Guide to the Superstitions of Britain and Ireland* for purchase by all

public and college libraries. If librarians can't afford to buy both volumes, they should probably choose *A Dictionary of English Folklore* for its broader subject coverage, though a new condensed edition of the *Penguin Guide* (published under the title *A Pocket Guide to Superstitions of the British Isles*) is around half the price of the full reference edition and might make it possible for libraries and individuals to buy both titles after all.

I have my own copies of the *Penguin Guide* and the *Dictionary of English Folklore* at home so that I can use them for reference or just grab them for a quick, fun read whenever I have a few minutes. All lovers of British folklore should consider buying copies of both of these "classics to be" for their home libraries—to anyone interested in the songs, tales, traditions, beliefs, and customs of the British Isles, the *Dictionary of English Folklore* and the *Penguin Guide to the Superstitions of Britain and Ireland* are well worth the price.

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*The Portable Mark Twain*. Edited by Tom Quirk. New York: Penguin, 2004. iiv + 583 pp. Paperback ISBN 9780142437759 \$17.00.

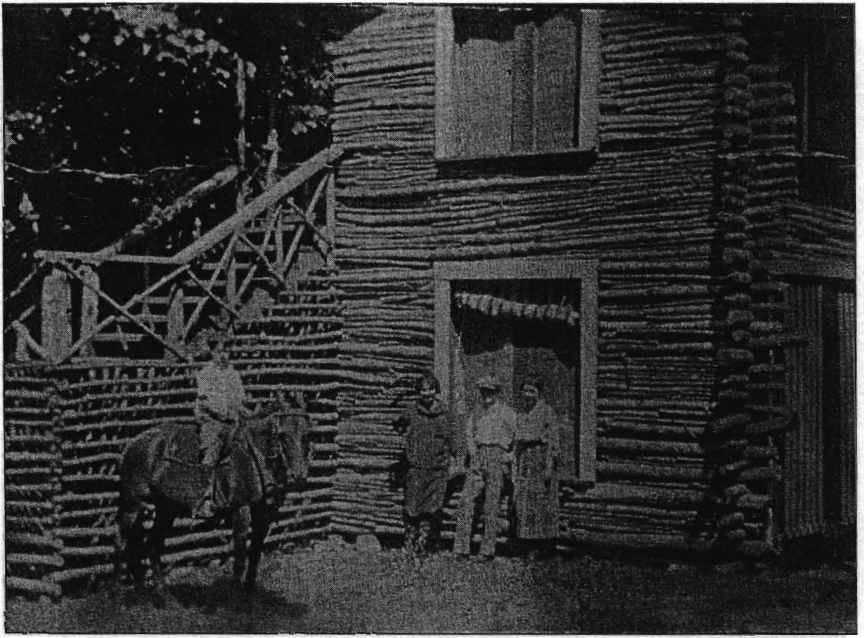
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To read in one lifetime everything that Mark Twain wrote would be a nearly impossible task. Indeed, sorting through his dozens of books, numerous sketches and short stories, and myriad of speeches and letters would be a formidable undertaking for any reader desiring a relatively accurate sense of Twain as a writer. Readers, therefore, are indebted to the latest edition of *The Portable Mark Twain* and to its editor, Tom Quirk. In his introduction, Quirk states that he hopes "to catch the flavor and inexhaustible variety of [Twain] at nearly every stage of his life" (xvi), and he accomplishes this goal through his knowledgeable selection of texts and his insightful commentary.

Twain repeatedly boasted that he was hard to tame, but Tom Quirk is an editor well qualified to corral him within two covers. Quirk is an internationally recognized Twain scholar and a professor of English at the University of Missouri-Columbia. He is editor and/or author of numerous studies of American literature and culture; a short list of his publications includes *Coming to Grips with Huckleberry Finn*, *Mark Twain: A Study of the Short Fiction*, *Nothing Abstract: Investigations in the American Literary Imagination*, and *American History through Literature*.

As mentioned above, this is a revised edition. The earlier edition,

# Missouri Folklore Society Journal



Volume 26 2004

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Volume 26, 2004

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The *Missouri Folklore Society Journal*  
is an annual publication of  
The Missouri Folklore Society  
P.O. Box 1757  
Columbia, Missouri 65205

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