



A review of
**Dancing
with Trees:
Eco-Tales from
the British Isles**

Joanna Gilar

From dancing oak trees to magic strawberries, hare princesses to bogland guardians, leprechauns, selkies, royal wrens and magical bees, *Dancing with Trees* provides a treasury to an enchanted British Isles. Authors Allison Galbraith and Alette J. Willis argue in their introduction that folktales and legends once 'belonged to the landscape they emerged from and to the people who lived there' (10) and that traditional tales were not just 'pleasant distractions for the end of the working day' but also 'quests for a good way to live' (11). The authors are both Scottish storytellers with backgrounds in eco-education, and they have put together this collection to speak to our need for 'an infusion of storied magic to bring us back into life and back into the ecological community to which we belong' (11). The collection they have co-created, therefore, is not simply a celebration of British folklore, but also a workbook towards environmental imagination.

Gathered into elemental chapters, readers of this book will find themselves drawn into air, fire, water and earth magic, as well as encountering sections on 'the web of life' and 'living in harmony', both of which contain beautiful and surprising stories that highlight the interconnectedness of the living world. For those seeking tales to celebrate a specific season, or work with a particular species, the book provides an index listing tales by seasonal festival, as well as by natural history. Here, you will find stories for celebration and contemplation of beings from blackbird to wild boar, strawberries to rowan tree, and stories for the year round, from Samhain to Summer Solstice.

The collection is rich and varied. Well-loved folk tales such as 'Jack and the Beanstalk' sit side by side with Celtic myths of Bride and Beara, and Ceridwen and Taliesin. Early Christian stories tell us of Saint Brigid, who tamed wolves, Saint Mungo, who resurrected a robin, and Saint Baglan, a Welsh saint who was wise enough to build a church around an oak tree, so that the 'only roof' was its 'wide, sheltering branches' (120). From the Scottish Travelling tradition we learn of Thomas the thatcher, who left his own thatch messy so the squirrels and bees could live safely within, and of Margaret McPherson, who

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was foolish enough to begrudge the fairies some milk, and reaped the consequences in the withering of her garden. There are fantastic tales of otherworldly encounters, such as 'Stolen by Fairies' about a brave father who recovers his only daughter from fairies by solving a riddle. Three greedy brothers are chastened out of their desire to club seals when they encounter them as a tribe of 'old men and women, young ones, children, teens, toddlers and mothers carrying babies' ('Seal Island', 86), and a young girl who catches a leprechaun does all she can to outwit it and win its gold, losing both gold and blueberries in the process ('The Blaeberry Girl'). Despite the variety of sources and origins, the book does not feel disparate, perhaps because it is so embedded in the wildlife and landscape of the UK. It is appropriate that the collection takes its name from the Scottish tale of the Dancing Trees, for, in this tale, a young man climbs down into the root holes left behind on the one day in a hundred years when the trees rise up to dance. When he does so, he finds treasures buried within. This is very much what the experience of the book is like: an immersion into the earth of our natural history to find hidden gems of wonder deeply embedded in the soil.

The stated intention of the authors was to create a collection of stories that speak to the contemporary need to respond, listen to and discuss the state of our environment. While all the tales are traditional, each has been retold 'in the context of current environmental crises' (13-14), and this has been done so in a way that does not feel invasive to the story, but a natural evolution in its cultural resonance. Indeed, many of the tales, while they carry the power of traditional tales, could also have been created today to speak to children about their relationship to their surroundings, such as the enchanting 'Elves and the Slop Bucket', which describes the invention of the compost heap, or 'The Alder Sprite', which emphasises listening and respecting before impacting one's environment.

Galbraith and Willis also provide a commentary after each discussing its potential use or relevance for environmental education. I found the annotations less successful than the stories themselves, in part because the intended audience feels slightly unclear, and in part because they move between folkloric background, suggestions for story-use and discussion of environmental resonance in a way that doesn't feel comprehensive enough to provide space for the complexity of the tales themselves. Given the space limitation, as an environmental resource it may have been more successful to list questions, rather than suggestions, following the tales, guiding both reader and potential audience into deeper reflection on the tale without attributing to it any particular message, and leaving conclusions for the reader to draw. I found the annotations most useful when they provided practical advice for the telling of the tales, sharing the authors' own experience, and there are some lovely ideas, such as telling a magical broom story deep in a forest, or creating bird masks to enact the old tale of 'The King and Queen of Birds'.

Overall, this small book is a treasury of enchantment, and a true aide to all tellers who wish to direct attention to the magic of this small island. If you are interested in using storytelling for environmental purpose or reflection, or, indeed, you are any kind of artist working with wild imaginings, this is a book I would recommend.

Authors: Allison Galbraith, Alette J. Willis.
The History Press (2017), 192pp.

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Joanna Gilar



A review of
**Botanical Folk
Tales of Britain
and Ireland**

Rose Williamson

Lisa Schneidau's *Botanical Folk Tales of Britain and Ireland* deftly wends its way through the year, retelling tales which celebrate the plants of each season. This well-curated collection traverses eras, regions, and times of year to present 38 British and Irish folktales to its readers. It begins with the cold, bitter winter and a Welsh tale of the evergreen yew ('The Forest of the Yew'), progressing from bright spring to hazy summer before ending with harvest tales in the rich autumn and entering once more into the earth's cyclical return to cold.

What this book is not is a compendium of folklore about plants – true to its title, it focusses on folktales which find plants at the very heart of the stories. Still, Schneidau slips a few pieces of lore into the introductions to each tale, and this is the right amount for a book which many will want to pick up just for a good story. This allows for the stories to hold a bit of folk wonder and plant lore, but rightly resists what could be a lengthy study into the magic of trees, flowers, and fruits. Occasionally, there is even a modern cultural factoid tossed in, providing interesting parallels between the faraway world of folktales and our present day with its complicated relationships to nature.

Before delving further into the stories, one more wonderful addition to this book is the regional tidbits of wisdom and rhyme that introduce each turning from one 'season' to the next (Schneidau has divided the year into eight marked points that capture different moments in winter, spring, summer, and autumn).

Although many of the tales will be familiar to the folktale scholar, Schneidau has reached back into the folktale vaults to find some botanical gems that I believe the general public will not have heard before. Alongside 'Mossycoat', 'Kate Crackernuts', and 'Yallery Brown' are tales such as 'The Wonderful Wood' and 'The Fairy Shawl'. Some of the stories Schneidau has chosen are true celebrations of nature's bounty ('That's Enough to Go On With'), whilst others serve as warnings ('The Travelling Tree'). But the overriding theme that runs throughout is one of an eco-conscious partnership between humans and the natural world. This is apparent in many of the tales which Schneidau has lightly edited, such as 'The Curse of Pantannas' and 'The Tulip Pixies'. It is most apparent in her own retelling of 'Jack and the Beanstalk'. Unlike many of the other tales collected in this book, Schneidau has played extensively with 'Jack and the Beanstalk' to infuse it with an eco-critical take on humanity's impact on the earth. Whilst the once-wild world Jack comes from is destroyed for the monoculture of wheat, the world of the giant is seasonally refreshed, filled with different flora every time Jack visits. I thoroughly enjoyed Schneidau's reimagining of this classic tale.

Schneidau notes in her introduction that she sees this book as a 'resource to be used for storytelling' (13). I think this is very apt as, apart from 'Jack and the Beanstalk', Schneidau has presented most of the tales in a pared-down tone. The simple style is reminiscent of the older resources that Schneidau has used to source her stories, and is ripe for embellishment by an oral storyteller. Occasionally, she has edited away dialect or local turn-of-phrase sometimes found in her sources. This perhaps serves to make the tales more accessible, but once or twice I found that the flavour of certain stories was lost to modern language.

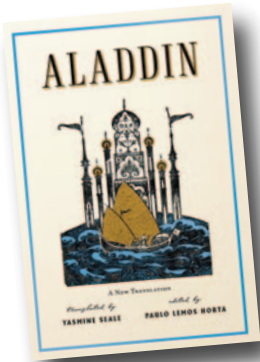
For the folktale enthusiast or scholar, another minor criticism of this collection might be that Schneidau provides an extensive list of her resources at the end of the collection, but does not signpost which story came from where (other than indicating each tale's originating region in the short tale introductions). The absence of this also made it difficult to get a sense of what time period each tale came from. For those who are interested in tracing these types of details, further detective work would be needed to connect each story to the relevant sources found at the back of the book. But this is not a deterrent to enjoying the collection, only a trivial desire from one who would seek out further reading and other variants of the tales.

Overall, I enjoyed *Botanical Folk Tales of Britain and Ireland*, and I think most readers who are intrigued by a cover bedecked with British flora and the promise of wild,

woody folktales will not be disappointed. Truly, nature and plants are an excellent theme around which to build a collection. By bringing together these tales, and juxtaposing them against her own reimagined 'Jack and the Beanstalk', Schneidau has illustrated that our relationship with nature has changed significantly, and, yet, paradoxically, our same fears, delights, uses, and abuses of nature are echoed in these stories of days gone by.

Author: Lisa Schneidau.
The History Press (2018), 192pp.

Rose Williamson



A review of **Aladdin:** **A New** **Translation**

Ruth B. Bottigheimer

Yasmine Seale's admirable translation of 'Aladdin' provides Antoine Galland's 1717 text to modern readers in graceful English. Although various English translations have been available for over 200 years, 'Aladdin's popularity has made it a prime candidate for commercial re-shapings, from 18th-century moralisations to adventure-laden and flying-carpet-embellished 21st-century film adaptations. Seale's translation maintains a lively narrative rhythm; her smooth rendering reflects her deep knowledge of 17th- and 18th-century French. Her colloquial style contrasts with Husain Haddawy's more exactly translated 'Story of 'Ala al-Din (Aladdin) and The Magic Lamp' in his 1995 *Arabian Nights* (II: 81-163). In both, the plot is gripping:

'Aladdin' begins in far off China with a fatherless ne'er-do-well fifteen-year-old who is 'cruel, stubborn, and rebellious' (1). Into his world comes Galland's villainous *magicien africain*, who needs someone to enter a cave and bring out a genie-inhabited lamp with nearly limitless wish-granting powers. Aladdin obligingly enters the cave, but refuses to

hand over the lamp until he himself is safely outside. Thereupon, the African magician closes him inside and leaves him to die. Aladdin nonetheless escapes, together with the lamp, and subsequently marries the sultan's daughter and becomes prominent and widely beloved.

The African magician, learning of Aladdin's escape and success, returns to China, winks the lamp away from the princess, and magics her *and* the palace to far distant northwestern Africa. Eventually Aladdin succeeds in killing the magician and returning to China with the princess. Some time later, the magician's wicked brother arrives to take revenge by persuading his wife to send Aladdin on a mortally dangerous quest. However, Aladdin once again prevails: the sultan dies without a male heir; his daughter succeeds to the throne and shares ultimate power with her husband; and – as Galland wrote – the two reigned together, leaving behind an illustrious posterity.

'Aladdin' occupied the second half of volume 9 and the first half of volume 10 of Galland's 12-volume *Mille et Une Nuits* (1704-17). The story's great length corresponds to its two-day-long telling to Galland in May 1709 by a 19-year-old Aleppan boy named Hanna Dyâb. He was the story's first known teller, and in my view, its creator. As a whole, he contributed richly to Galland's collection by composing, or re-composing, stories from known sources which Galland edited and expanded for volumes 9-12. To get a sense of Dyâb-the-storyteller, we may read his often wonder-struck account of his life in Paris in the months before and after he told 'Aladdin' (and other stories) to Galland. Alas, Galland did not record one of those stories – 'Aladdin'!

Seale revises the *Nights'* black-white prejudice by regularly omitting the African part of the wicked magician's identity. This is appropriate, I think, for a stand-alone translation of 'Aladdin' that is intended for a broad readership. I wonder, however, what Seale will do in translating the collection's problematic frame tale, where the *Nights* foregrounds the blackness of the sultanness's adulterous lover.

As far as Hanna Dyâb's telling of 'Aladdin' is concerned, we are left with the distinct possibility that he told it in a fast-moving colloquial Arabic that was hard for Galland to write down, for in the fall of 1709, after Dyâb had left Paris, he wrote it out in Arabic and sent it back to Galland. Dyâb's other tales were told in an Aleppo-inflected French, as is indicated by traces of that accent in Galland's journal.

What is very important is that Galland himself acknowledged that 'Aladdin' was an entirely different kind of story from what had preceded it in the *Nights*, when he put the following words into Shahrazade's mouth after she concluded her telling: 'l'histoire d'Aladdin et de Bedroulboudour [est] toute différente de ce qui lui avait été raconté jusqu'alors ...' (the story of Aladdin and Bedroulboudour is completely different from what had been told to [Shahriar] up 'til then ...).

The 'Aladdin' story has no precedent in Arabic-language tradition, either written or oral. Thus Mia Gehrhart dubbed 'Aladdin' an 'orphan tale', which it has been called for more than fifty years. It would be more accurate, however, to call it a tale of unknown parentage, since its characters – although they are exotically clad, bear Arabic names, and wander in alien landscapes – exhibit so many European characteristics. Also European – and not 15th-to-18th-century Middle Eastern – is the hero's social trajectory, namely from rags to riches and marriage to royalty: the *Nights* has many poor characters who become rich through a sultan's grace and favor, but none who marries a sultan's daughter, the happy-ever-after ending of European fairy tales. European iconic numbers (three, seven) take their place alongside the standard Arabic forty and thousand. No woman succeeds to her father's throne in Arabic literature before Bedroulboudour does so in Dyâb's tale, nor does a woman pass royal power to her husband, although this happens in Straparola's 1550s 'Livoretto'. In other words, the Arabic 'Aladdin' that came into 18th-century European popular literature was well prepared to fit into existing plot patterns, even though its content and referents were distinctly Middle Eastern.

An introductory essay by Paolo Horta (vii-xxii) ably reviews 'Aladdin's place in 18th-21st-century literature and entertainment, adding to his 2017 *Marvellous Thieves*. In the emerging scholarship about Hanna Dyâb's role in volumes 9-12 of Galland's *Mille et Une Nuits*, Horta positions Dyâb more as a conduit ('even if he did not have a hand in the composition' (xi) and 'for all those who may have told ['Aladdin'] before him' (xxii)) than a creator. His cautious phrases 'even if' and 'may have' mark and identify a critical divide in current *Nights* scholarship.

Translator: Yasmine Seale. Introduction: Paolo L. Horta.
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Ruth B. Bottigheimer

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