



A review of
**Told Again:
Old Tales
Told Again**
Nicholas Tucker

First published in 1927, these 19 retold fairy tales still come over very well. Avoiding the archaisms that sometimes overburdened his verse, de la Mare reaches instead into his vast repertoire of countryside words and phrases, some original and others made up by himself with a poet's instinctive knowledge for what would sound best. Unafraid to invent detail, sometimes giving a traditional story an unexpected twist, this is a book written by an author fully confident of his poetic gifts. Elegantly produced, retaining A.H. Watson's original line drawings, it is a pleasure to read.

De la Mare was also a man of his time, and there are moments when 21st-century values run counter to what could be said and written ninety years ago. In one story, *The Turnip*, the farmer nearing the gates of a palace drawing his gigantic vegetable behind him is greeted with as much astonishment as if 'a White Man had come at morning into a village of savages'. Another story features a mighty Blackamoor, also described as a savage, garlanded with feathers and paint. Elsewhere humpbacks attract customary derision, dwarfs burgeon and Cinderella's two sisters, after their unsuccessful attempts at do-it-yourself orthopedic surgery, are described by the end as 'The Two Old Stump-stumps'. A merchant simply described as 'the Jew' gets off lightly, given that de la Mare in his private correspondence was not above repeatedly complaining about 'rich hotel-haunting Jews' when staying with his wife at Brighton in 1938.

Eight years later he wrote an introduction to *Nursery Rhymes for Certain Times*, an anthology whose rhymes were based on a selection made by his brother-in-law Roger Ingpen some years before and with the editing now undertaken by de la Mare's sister Ada. Published in 1946, it still included one verse from *Old Mother Goose and the Golden Egg* which runs 'Jack sold his gold eggs, To a rogue of a Jew, Who cheated him out of, The half of its due.' Other anthologies by this time had found ways of softening this crude little verse, but this particular edition remained unchanged and in print for years afterwards.

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But hunting out prejudice common at the time is too easy a task. There are more important things going on here, with de la Mare's feelings for his young, often dispossessed, characters always generous and warm. In his introduction Philip Pullman draws attention to the poet's straight talking when retelling these stories, avoiding the fey and winsome tones adopted by other writers of the time, and all the while continuing to find beauty in just the right choice of adjective. In 1935 de la Mare assembled his superb anthology *Early One Morning in Spring: Chapters on Children and on Childhood as it is Revealed in Particular in Early Memories and in Early Writing*. One of his themes here is the desirability as he saw it for children to encounter at least some glimpse of fear and horror in their early reading for a better understanding for the totality of human experience. But while there is still some violence there are few moments of out-and-out cruelty in *Told Again*, with Rapunzel's story now omitting the nasty business of the Prince's blinding.

De la Mare is a somewhat neglected figure these days, even in his own time standing out from others for so determinedly looking away from modernity in favour of his own private world of rich imagination. This book shows once again what a good and original writer he was.

Author: Walter de la Mare with a new introduction by Philip Pullman.
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