



A review of
**The Boggart:
Folklore, History,
Place-names
and Dialect**

Katherine Langrish

In this fascinating, extensively researched account, Simon Young champions 'Britain's most understudied supernatural being', the Boggart – and makes a good case for it also being one of the most misrepresented. His stated aim is to 'reconstitute beliefs for one place (Boggartdom) and for one period (1838-1914) using contemporary or near contemporary documents'. He is well situated to do this, having created *The Boggart Source Book*, a free online research base of thousands of words of Victorian and Edwardian boggart-lore drawn from books, articles, newspapers and broadsides. Additionally, in 2019 he conducted an online 'Boggart Census' which gathered 1,100 responses recording 'snapshot[s] of the boggart folklore that a given man or woman had grown up with, from 1920 to 1970'.

This large database has enabled a localised mapping of boggart placenames and encounters. Plotting boggart toponyms on 19th-century maps, along with boggart personal names linked to specific locations or dwellings, Young charts the distribution of the boggart in the territory he calls 'Boggartdom' – Lancashire and West Yorkshire, with outliers in Lincolnshire and Cleveland – and places it in a wider north-western context with its relations the Dobbie of north Lancashire/Westmorland and the Cumberland Boggle: names which Young suggests do not indicate separate types of supernatural creature, but are instead 'regional reflexes of a similar generic bogie'.

Studying boggart names and lore in actual topographies has led Young to some interesting conclusions. For example, 'Boggart Holes' and 'Fairy Holes' are both to be found in the landscape, but Young finds that fairy placenames are associated with wild, natural features such as crags, streams and wells, while boggart toponyms tend to be situated on the liminal (and in the 19th century, badly lit) outskirts of towns and villages, marking halls, houses, barns, lanes, crossroads, bridges, tunnels, mines and railways. 'Fairies dominate the supernatural physical geography of the north,' he writes. 'Boggarts are, on the other hand, part of supernatural human geography.' This is a fascinating distinction, further illuminated by Young's remark that if fairies 'offer a mirror to human society' (since their activities resemble ours), boggarts 'are not the mirror, rather the shadow of their victims.' His account is full of tales

and references which fully uphold his contention that boggart encounters were regarded as fearful or terrifying. In the early to mid-1800s the Kidgrew Boggart haunted 'the canal tunnel, the mines and the countryside' around the Staffordshire village of Kids Grove, manifesting sometimes as a dog, sometimes as a 'flickering light' and sometimes as a headless woman. Locals explained it as the ghost of a woman murdered on the canal. References to supernatural horrors such as fireballs and revenants, haunted houses and lanes, and even a bleeding bridge near Colne demonstrate the polymorphic range of the boggart as a 19th-century phenomenon: 'an ecosystem' as Young puts it, rather than 'a species'.

Investigating the etymology of the term, he finds that 16th- and 17th-century definitions of 'boggart' glossed it as a 'bugbear', 'phantasm' or 'Spirit that frights one'; while for 19th-century regional writers familiar with the word the most common definition was 'ghost' – followed by 'hobgoblin' 'bugbear', 'spectre', 'apparition' and 'spirit'. In their contemporary context most of these terms were generic, like 'troll' in Scandinavia, and referred to many kinds of frightening solitary supernatural entities. This is likely to come as a surprise to many, including myself, who first encountered boggarts in 20th-century children's fiction and in the work of the great Katharine Briggs. Her entry for 'Boggart' in the *Dictionary of Fairies* describes: 'A mischievous BROWNIE, almost exactly like a poltergeist in his habits' and characterises Brownies themselves as little men with shaggy heads who emerge at night to do farm work and housework in return for bowls of cream.

So how did a catch-all term for frightening things – 'demons, ghosts, hobs, shape-changers, water monsters and will o' the wisps' to name but a few – become narrowed down to indicate only a goblinesque house spirit? Young points to a folktale known as 'The Pertinacious Cobold' in which the activities of a mischievous brownie drives a farmer to leave his home. After the 19th-century folklorist Thomas Crofton Croker published two Irish versions, an anonymous Yorkshire correspondent sent a boggart variant to the *Literary Gazette* (16 April 1825). Croker reprinted this in *Fairy Legends* (1825) and later plagiarised and wrote it up for John Roby's *Traditions of Lancashire* (1829), altering its Yorkshire names to Lancashire-sounding ones. Both books were influential, and 'at a national level, the tale came to be associated with boggarts', spreading the impression that a boggart was a type of naughty brownie. This impression was strengthened when the Victorian children's writer Mrs Ewing wrote *The Brownies* (1865), in which a race of tiny, nimble domestic sprites are called 'brownies' when they are 'useful and considerate' but 'boggarts' when they are bad. Mrs Ewing urges children to be helpful brownies, not naughty boggarts. Lord Baden-Powell took both the point and the name for the younger Girl Guides, and the boggart = brownie equation became fixed in the public imagination.

During the 20th century, boggarts in children's fiction kept very much in line with the helpful/mischievous house-hob image, notably in William Mayne's *Earthfasts* (1969) – my own first meeting with a fictional boggart – and Susan Cooper's *The Boggart* (1993) and later sequels about a Scottish boggart which emigrates to Canada in a family's computer. Then came J.K. Rowling's *The Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), in which Harry Potter and his friends learn how

to deal with a boggart, depicted as 'a shape-shifting creature that [...] assumes the shape of the victim's worst fears'. Young slyly suggests that in this, Rowling may be closer than many a modern folklorist to the 19th-century boggart, since 'there is at least a sense of fear and horrid potential'.

However that may be, Rowling's boggart seems to have had little impact on 21st-century representations of the boggart, now widely seen as a nature-guardian; we learn of national parks, gardens and trails, such as the Pendle Sculpture Trail, which use stories and even models of green, goblin-esque nature-boggarts to encourage children to learn about wildlife. Young is relaxed about this, for as he says: 'Supernatural creatures and human ideas about them very properly have a life of their own.' Nevertheless it would have been a shame to have lost the back-story of the boggart's long career in supernatural terror. Detailed, scholarly, packed with great tales and interesting speculations, *The Boggart* is a ground-breaking study that rescues and re-establishes the scary boggart of the 19th century.

Author: Simon Young.

Publisher: Exeter Press (2022), 330 pp.

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