



*A review of*  
**The Dragon:  
Fear and Power**

Jacqueline Simpson

**T**his is a richly comprehensive survey of the representation of dragons in literature, art and folklore, both in European tradition and in Asia. I am not qualified to comment on this latter aspect, but Dr Arnold's account of European material seems to me admirably full (though with one strange omission, discussed below); it begins with the ancient mythologies of the Near East, the Old Testament, and the Classical world, and continues right to the present day, ending with comments on Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and G.R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*. Similarly, the many fine illustrations range far and wide over sacred and secular art, and include archaeological material – and also some delightful oddities such as the alleged remains of a young dragon to be seen in the Museum of Rudolph II in Prague, actually created from the mutilated skeleton of a cat, with wings attached (211). In discussing why dragons occupy such a place in human imagination, the relevant theories of Freud, Sagan, Levi-Strauss and others are outlined.

Since the great majority of traditional accounts of dragons represent them as destructive of human life and property, it is very understandable that, as the subtitle indicates, they are commonly regarded as symbols of hostile power, whether that be the power of untamed nature, of human enemies, of tyrannical rulers, or of Satan, who for Christians is the embodiment of moral evil. Dr Arnold shows that the identification of dragon with devil, based firmly upon the Book of Revelations, remained unchallenged until translations of the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* and of Icelandic sagas introduced us to the fierce, intelligent, but undemonic dragons of Scandinavia. This was the first major turning point in the way dragons were imagined; another came in 1898 with Kenneth Grahame's *The Reluctant Dragon*, the first book to describe a friendly alliance between the monster and a child, which has now been followed by countless stories of what Dr Arnold charmingly calls 'nursery dragons'.

The one strange omission I noticed is cinematic: the absence of any reference to Tim Burton's 2010 film of 'Alice in Wonderland'. Dr Arnold does include mention of the killing of the dragon-like Jabberwock in the course of Lewis Carroll's book, but not of its important role as the climax of Burton's film. This is a pity, for it perfectly matches Arnold's argument: Burton makes the Jabberwock the fierce pet of the tyrannical Red Queen, which Alice has

to decapitate in order to restore the angelic White Queen to her rightful throne. With the monster's death, the tyrant is deposed and driven into exile.

The publishers are to be congratulated on a beautifully produced book, which is a joy to handle and examine.

Author: Martin Arnold.

Reaktion Books (2018), 328pp.

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## Jacqueline Simpson



### *A review of* **Sussex Folk Tales for Children**

Paul Quinn

**T**his odd curio from The History Press is frequently charming and is entertaining throughout, albeit in an entirely forgettable way. For an adult reader, this represents a stolen afternoon reading folkloric tales about various towns, villages and geographical features in Sussex – the eastern half of the county to be absolutely precise as apart from tale number 5, 'Skylarks of Sussex', which does not name its setting other than Ashdown Forest and which is prefaced with a verse from a former resident of St Leonard's Forest (in West Sussex); the other fourteen tales are set in what is now East Sussex. The adult reader will be entertained and they may learn something – if they are an absolute novice in terms of the history and folklore of Sussex (such as the etymology of the word 'Sussex' which is explained on pp. 10 and 70) – but the tales will disappear, Puck-like, from their memory within a few hours or a few days. That is, in part, because this is a book designed for children, and in part because of fundamental problems with the text, despite the charm and brevity of the stories in the volume.

Both the acknowledgements and the introduction by Xanthe and Robin Knight refer to and thank the Copper family and their songs and stories; this is qualified in the

acknowledgements with reference to the *Copper Family Songbook* and Bob Copper's books *Early to Rise*, *A Man of No Consequence*, and *A Song for Every Season* (7). The acknowledgements state that *Sussex Folk Tales for Children* has 'incorporated details and characters' from Bob Copper's three books. We then find further thanks, notably to Ray Williams of the Blanton Museum of Art in Texas for 'guidance on how to develop "A Thimbleful of Sugar"' (7) and to Des and Ali Quarrell of Mythstories Museum of Myth and Fable 'for the inspiration for "Seven Sisters (and One Shepherd)'" (8). It is left unclear as to how far these tales are original works by Xanthe and Robin Knight, and how far they are based on traditional stories and songs found in the various Copper collections or based on guidance and inspiration from other folklore experts. That would be fine in itself except for the intention described in the blurb: 'The stories in this collection ... tell of Sussex: its sparkling seas; chalk giants; wise witches and cross-dressing smugglers. Once you've heard them, you'll know that when leaves skitter, it's Puck, the sprite of Sussex, fighting with his Sister the Fairy Queen.' The blurb continues in a similar vein, ending with the intention that 'these stories will also stimulate an interest in the country and help children engage with their own surroundings'. At no point does the blurb suggest this is a retelling of traditional oral tales, of the type presumably preserved in the Copper volumes, or that it may contain new material. This lack of clarity is a reflection of the volume as a whole. That ambiguity could be overcome by the inclusion of prefatory material or notes describing the sources of the individual stories. However, that type of academic material would be out of place in what is primarily a children's text. Nevertheless, without this clarity of both purpose and source, this volume risks heaping myth upon myth and thus obscuring the traditional tale beneath any new material.

This collision of stories is apparent in story six, 'Devil's Dyke', in which the Devil – making a second appearance in the collection after the account of his confrontation with St Dunstan – rampages along the Sussex coast through a catalogue of towns which includes Saltdean and Peacehaven. The problem here is that Peacehaven was only established in 1916 and was only named 'Peacehaven' in 1917 (having been originally called New Anzac on Sea) and Saltdean was an uninhabited piece of farmland until 1924. As such, neither town has a place in a story about Sussex in the dim and distant past. It is difficult to explain why those towns need to be mentioned at all except to provide some type of geographic aid or specific location for the reader but it would be a very local reader, particularly a child, who would recognise those place names.

A similarly awkward inclusion of modern elements in the retelling of a traditional tale can be identified in the same tale's description of sleep in Sussex during St Dunstan's time in the county. St Dunstan – a killjoy in this tale and in his earlier appearance in the second story in the volume – prevents 'parties or dancing; there was no rollicking laughter after midnight' (82). The reader is then told 'as in those days there was no blue light interference from mobiles or tablets, the people slept like the dead' (82-3). This is a clumsy interpolation and has no place in the text.

A major problem with the volume and the implications for the text suggested by the title – *Sussex* (emphasis added) *Folk Tales for Children* – is revealed at the opening of ‘The Rise of the Sussex Doughman’ (147-66). Rampaging around Lewes and its surroundings like the Stay Puff Marshmallow Man in *Ghostbusters*, the titular giant Doughman is at the centre of a tale of corrupt local politics which sees Lewes’ vainglorious capitalist Mayor flee the town to escape the breaden threat of the Doughman and then be subsequently replaced by Chols the farm boy, who saves Lewes from the outsized pastry by luring the Doughman to the banks of the River Ouse with the smell of a pan of frying butter and having him knocked into the river by a ram. The story is bizarre and is reasonably entertaining. But the story’s description of Lewes as ‘The capital of Sussex’ (148) is simply untrue. Lewes has never been the capital of Sussex; it is the county town of East Sussex and has been since the separation of the ancient county of Sussex into the ceremonial counties of East and West Sussex in 1974. Prior to that Lewes had been an Arch-Deaconry of the Diocese of Chichester – partly a reflection of the terrible road conditions in Sussex, making east to west travel difficult (a situation those unfortunate enough to travel along the A27 will still recognise) and ecclesiastical governance all but impossible – and thus had a degree of autonomy, but it was never the county town of Sussex: that has always been Chichester. This incorrect description of Lewes reflects the fact that this is really a volume about East Sussex. As previously stated, all of the stories bar one are set in East Sussex. As such there is no mention of the Sussex Serpent (St Leonard’s Forest, near Horsham) and no mention of Bevis of Hampton, the giant associated with Arundel Castle.

This relentless focus on East Sussex prompts the question how this volume would appeal to a child reader in urban Crawley or Bognor or indeed the East Sussex suburbs of Mouslecoomb or Whitehawk. Indeed, this review questions the book’s appeal to 7- to 11-year-olds for whom the blurb suggests the book is intended. She may be outside the age range intended by the authors or publishers but my own bookish four-and-a-half year old daughter, asking to have one of the stories read to her, became bored after a page and a half. The black and white illustrations by Sherry Robinson are unlikely to hold the interest of younger children, although some of the pictures of animals are very pretty.

What we have ultimately is a collection of enjoyable but slight tales whose provenance is unclear and which must remain so as the type of information or apparatus necessary to describe the source or history of the tales is precluded by the genre of children’s fiction. This is a great pity but no-one has yet found a way of squaring that particular circle.

Authors: Xanthe Gresham Knight and Robin Knight.  
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**Paul Quinn**