



A review of
**The Fabled Coast:
Legends and Traditions
from around the Shores
of Britain and Ireland**

Jacqueline Simpson

A folklorist setting out to write a general survey for the non-specialist market has some tricky choices to make as regards the organisation and presentation of the material. Three formats have proved enduringly popular: the regional survey, covering all or most genres that can be found within one limited area, typically a county; the topic-based study, discussing a single theme such as fairy-lore, plant-lore, or dragon legends, but with examples selected widely in space and time; and the nationwide 'gazetteer', where the items are diverse, but each is linked to a specific locality before its background is explored. This last makes for lively and varied reading, and is likely to sell in any part of the country; not surprisingly, it is much favoured by publishers.

In a series of books beginning with *Albion* in 1985, the late Jennifer Westwood proved herself to be a brilliant proponent of the gazetteer format as an approach to local legends. In an email to the present reviewer (18 August 2007) she explained why it appealed to her:

As far as I'm concerned, it isn't the narrative that is of paramount interest, given that the same stories come up over and over again, but why the story was told in and about and by that particular community. As often as not, the trigger for telling it was some visible mnemonic in the landscape, rural or urban – a hill, a rock, a field, a river, a dyke, a tree; a monument, ancient or modern; a particular manor or farmhouse or castle; or indoors a particular portrait, stained flagstone, secret cubby-hole, arch in the cellar etc. Even when stories seem to be about people, they are often just as much about something that can be seen and prompts the telling of the story.

Obviously, she was thinking of places on land. But Westwood had also long been planning to write a book on the folklore of the sea, and when she died in 2008 she left behind a mass of material related to this project, entrusting it to her friend and research assistant Sophia Kingshill to complete and bring to publication, which she has now very successfully done. The process, as Kingshill tells readers at the outset, produced a collaboration in which she would find it hard to sort out who wrote what. We must be grateful to her for fulfilling her task so well.

By its very nature, most sea lore is not closely bound to a particular location, so the choice of a gazetteer as the organizing principle for *The Fabled Coast* may seem a little strange, though in practice it works remarkably well. A network of cross-references and a detailed index ensure that, even where the initial localisation of a topic is rather arbitrary, a reader who is curious about it will be led on to further information to build up a rounded picture. For example, the widespread belief that the souls of drowned sailors reincarnate as sea-birds is first mentioned in relation to Porlock in Somerset (36-7), the slender link being a statement by Ruth Tongue, who was told by Porlock people that if you look into a seagull's eyes it will one day ensure that you drown, but a cross-reference leads to a fuller and more broadly based account of soul-birds (264-5). Similarly, the common taboo among fishermen on naming pigs, hares or rabbits is located at three separate places, but it is made clear that each is simply one instance of a general principle, and parallels can be quickly found via the index. Thus even a reader with little or no previous knowledge of folklore will be gradually and painlessly introduced to a wide range of information, and will unconsciously absorb such basic scholarly principles as the constant recurrence of traditional tales, customs and beliefs, with the similarity underlying their surface diversity, and their development over time.

Throughout the book there is considerable emphasis on the historical underpinnings of folklore; indeed, there are entries about persons and events that are pure history (e.g. Grace Darling, famous pirates, various shipwrecks) yet have become so embedded in popular memory that even without the accretion of any legendary fantasies they are felt as part of tradition. Occasionally a purist might carp at some inclusion as irrelevant – what, one could ask, is 'folkloric' about the Lion's Mane (97), a real species of jellyfish which features in a literary source, a late Sherlock Holmes story? There are also one or two cases where I was left unsure how much factual basis there was (if any) for the tale being recounted, e.g. the melodramatic account of a fair lady's corpse allegedly brought for burial to Thorpe-le-Soken in 1751 (142-3). The description of the ghost ships of the Goodwin Sands (90-1) speaks of the wreck of the *Lady Lovibund* as fact, though dismissing its romantic explanatory legend, but it appears from *The Lore of the Land* (380) that Jennifer Westwood had come to doubt that a ship of this name had ever existed.

There is one flaw in the book for which its authors cannot be blamed, for it is part of the house style insisted on by the publishers, Penguin Books. This concerns the reference notes. Where an entry includes information drawn from several sources, as almost all do, it would seem logical for the note to give a reference to the main source first, followed by sources for minor details, either in chronological order or in an order matching their use in the entry itself. Penguin, however, lists them in alphabetical order of their authors' or editors' names, which is no help to a researcher wanting to follow up some intriguing but subordinate point.

Such matters, however, need not trouble most readers. They will find here a delightfully lively, yet scholarly, display of vast and varied lore: tales of mermaids, sea-serpents, smugglers, wreckers, fairy islands, drowned cities, ship-sinking witches, pirates, treasures, ghosts, portents ... the list is endless. Instruction and entertainment both guaranteed.

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