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# Terry Pratchett, Tiffany Aching, and the Wee Free Men

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When I was asked to talk about Terry Pratchett's *The Wee Free Men* I found myself wondering where to begin, for it is a rich and many-layered book. I thought it might be useful to go to the internet to find some websites giving reviews and readers' reactions when it first came out. As that was ten years ago, most of them have disappeared from view, but I did find a handful, and they all said more or less the same thing: 'This isn't what I expect from Terry! Why are there so few jokes and laugh-aloud situations?'

And yes, it's true, this book *is* different from the 29 Discworld books which came before it; he is, as he would put it, 'using a different tool-box'. But the novel element is not the Nac Mac Feegles themselves, who had featured in one strand of *Carpe Jugulum*. Terry quite frequently creates characters for a sub-plot in one book and then develops and elaborates them for a central role in another a few years later. One can get a lot of fun trying to track down everything that went into the Feegles. Their six-inch size recalls the demon Quezovercoatl the Feathered Boa in *Eric*, though this time the joke works the other way round: Quezovercoatl took on the role of a mighty god, but when he manifested himself in physical form the poor fellow was so small that he was trampled underfoot by Rincewind's Luggage; whereas Feegles have strength and ferocity far exceeding their size, and strike terror to all who know them. These features first appear in the person of Wee Mad Arthur, the rat-catcher in the sewers of Ankh-Morpork, and we do learn, many books later, that Arthur is indeed a Feegle.

The description of the Feegles draws upon many stereotypes of Scottishness, past, present and fictional: whisky, red hair, clans, kilts, bagpipes, bards, hunting, stealing, cattle-raiding, and above all an unquenchable appetite for rough fighting. Their language is based on Glasgow street slang but includes a smattering of Highland Gaelic words; among their battle cries are distorted quotations from the film 'Braveheart' and a song by The Who; their dismayed 'Oh, waley, waley!' is a cry of grief known from several traditional Scottish folksongs.

Most importantly, Pratchett has absorbed and adapted traditions about Picts, the name given by Romans in the times of Julius Caesar to a tribe of Celts who inhabited parts of Scotland. What they called themselves is unknown. 'Picts' is a Latin word, *picti*, meaning 'painted men', because they dyed themselves blue and 'had designs carved into their faces by iron' – a clear reference to tattooing. They were great fighters, and never submitted to Roman rule. That much is history. It is often claimed that their societies were matrilinear, with status and property transmitted down the female line, though modern scholars think there is little evidence for this. But this notion, combined with Pratchett's expertise in bee-keeping, underpins his fascinating account of how a Feegle clan is organised around its Kelda. This word 'kelda', incidentally, is rather mysterious; a commentator on the L-space website identifies it with an Old Norse word meaning 'source of water, spring', but my own guess is that Terry devised it as a worn-down form of Cailleach Dhubh, 'Black Hag', this being the name of a powerful supernatural female figure in Gaelic Scottish and Irish folklore. I said as much in *The Folklore of Discworld*, and he did not reject the idea, so we can let it stand.

In later centuries, the Picts were transformed in Scottish folklore into a race of dwarfish supernatural beings called Pechs or Pechts. They were 'unco wee bodies, but terrible strang', wrote a certain James Knox in 1831, and lived in underground chambers and burial mounds. Indeed, for generations the Scots took it for granted that any odd stone structures found underground were 'Picts' houses'. Robert Chambers, in his *Popular Rhymes of Scotland* (1870), wrote: 'Short wee men they were, wi' red hair, and long arms, and feet sae braid that when it rained they could turn them up owre their heads, and then they served for umbrellas. The Pechs were great builders; they built a' the auld castles in the kintry.' This refers to the brochs, a type of ancient round tower, which Scotsmen called 'Picts' castles'. It was said they could raise a broch in a single night, quarrying the stones, forming a long chain from the quarry to the chosen site, flinging the stones from hand to hand, and then piling them into massive walls.[1]

The name Nac Mac Feegle itself shows Terry's use of Scottish and Irish lore. 'Mac Feegle' means 'Sons of Feegle', and 'Feegle' is clearly his variation on 'Fingal', the 18th-century Scottish name for Finn MacCool, a great hunter and warrior hero in Celtic tradition (the Irish spelling is Fionn Mac Cumhaill). Tales about him have been popular for over twelve hundred years in Ireland, and almost equally long in Scotland.[2] He was the chieftain of the *fianna,* a band of wild young men who lived by hunting deer and wild boar, fighting, cattle-raiding and robbing. At times they might take service under some king and fight in his wars; at other times they chose an independent life. All were fearless in confronting any enemy, natural or supernatural.[3] Finn himself more than once entered some sinister region of the Otherworld and had to fight his way out against great odds. It is very appropriate that the Wee Free Men should take their name from him.

Some aspects of the sinister fairyland in *The Wee Free Men* will be familiar to readers of the Discworld series from the earlier *Lords and Ladies*, for in both books Pratchett is drawing on traditional lore which sees elves and fairies as dangerous beings, endowed with deceptive glamour and often wantonly cruel in their dealings with humans.[4] They entice children and adults into fairyland, where time flows differently; many who enter there never return, while those who do come back find that centuries have passed and everything they once knew has changed. Only rarely can someone enter fairyland and emerge unharmed; even more rarely can some exceptionally brave person rescue a friend or lover captured by fairies. Among many tales on these themes are two famous ballads, 'Thomas the Rhymer' and 'Tam Lin'; there are quotations and allusions to them both in *Lords and Ladies* and in *The Wee Free Men*, but I shall leave you the pleasure of spotting them for yourselves if you have not already done so. And in a third, less well-known, ballad, called 'King Orfeo', you will find the 'notes of pain' with which the gonnagle routed the grimhounds.

So much for those tried and trusted tools of folk belief, fairy tales and folksong with which Terry had so often crafted details of his Discworld. What I suspect may have disconcerted some of his readers when first encountering the Tiffany series is the quiet, tender, poetic tone of many passages, for gentleness and lyricism had not been common in Terry's writing up to this point (though they do occasionally appear, for instance when writing of the Dark Morris in *Reaper Man*). Here, he powerfully deploys his new voice when describing the Chalk country:

> They call it the Chalk. Green downlands roll under the hot midsummer sun. Flocks of sheep, moving slowly, drift over the soft turf like clouds on a green sky. Here and there sheepdogs speed over the turf like comets. And then, as the eyes pull back, it is a long green mound, lying like a great whale on the world.[5]

It has chalk pits, 'deep holes in the rolling green, filled with thickets of thorns and brambles', where one can find big knobbly flints called calkins, which look as if 'in the dark, under the sea, the chalk had been trying to make the shapes of living creatures'. And chalk itself is a strange, paradoxical substance: 'It's the shells of billions and billions of tiny, helpless little sea creatures that died millions of years ago,' said Miss Tick. 'It's tiny, tiny bones.'

Mankind too has left its mark on Tiffany's country, as on our own Downs:

> Men had been everywhere on the Chalk. There were stone circles, half fallen down, and burial grounds like green pimples where, it was said, chieftains of the olden days had been buried with their treasure. No one fancied digging into them to find out.

> There were odd carvings in the chalk, too, which the shepherds sometimes weeded when they were out on the downs with the flocks and there was not a lot to do. The chalk was only a few inches under the turf. Hoofprints could last a season, but the carvings had lasted for thousands of years. They were pictures of horses and giants, but the strange thing was that you couldn't see them properly from anywhere on the ground. They looked as if they'd been made for viewers in the sky.[6]

In our joint book *The Folklore of Discworld*, Terry laid out his intentions: 'The Tiffany Aching books are, whatever other splendid things they may be, a hymn to a time and a landscape':[7] the time when the South Downs were open country, unfenced, unploughed, turf-covered, a land fit for sheep. For me that landscape is an actual memory, because I knew it as a child in the 1930s; for Terry, it lives only in his imagination, for it had been destroyed by arable farming before he was born. But chalk pits remain; I believe he used to pass one as he walked to school and ponder about flints and fossils, though we will have to wait for publication of his autobiography to be sure.

Sheep need a shepherd. The figure of Granny Aching is absolutely central to *The Wee Free Men*. She is a supremely skilled and conscientious shepherd, with all the toil and responsibility this entails:

> [One would see] Granny Aching's light weaving slowly across the downs on freezing, sparkly nights or in storms like a raging war, saving lambs from the creeping frost or rams from the precipice. She froze and struggled and tramped through the night for idiot sheep that never said thank you and would probably be just as stupid tomorrow, and get into the same trouble again. And she did it because not doing it was unthinkable.[8]

When she died a tuft of wool was pinned to the blanket in which she was buried, to tell the gods that she had been a shepherd

> and spent a lot of time on the hills, and what with lambing and one thing and another couldn't always take much time out for religion, there being no churches or temples up there, and therefore it was generally hoped that the gods would understand and look kindly on them.[9]

This was done in some villages on Earth too. 'It all added up to the same thing,' Terry wrote in *The Folklore of Discworld*, 'a hope and also perhaps a belief that one Good Shepherd would recognise another'.[10]

The chalk and flint were in Granny Aching's bones. The sky was her hat and the wind her cloak, for she was not only a shepherd but a witch, though she never called herself that. She had a stern moral authority; where there was injustice she saw to it that there would be a reckoning, since 'Them as can do has to do for them as can't, and someone has to speak up for them as has no voices'.[11]

It is worth turning aside for a moment to notice how many of Pratchett's major characters feel righteous anger as they consider the injustice of society, of the gods, of fate, of life itself. Vimes and Granny Weatherwax have it from the start; Cohen has developed it by the time he appears in *The Last Hero*, and in that book too Rincewind and Carrot quietly agree that it's quite hard, practically impossible, not to look down on the gods. At first sight Vetinari appears to be an exception, but that is only because his anger is made of ice, not fire, as we can see from what he says to Vimes about the evil in human nature in *Guards! Guards!* and his even more bitter remarks during the banquet in *Unseen Academicals* about the cruelty of the natural world, as exemplified by a mother otter and her cubs, which he once saw tearing a pregnant salmon to pieces to devour the roes:

> One of nature's wonders, gentlemen: mother and children dining upon mother and children. That's when I first learnt about evil. It is built into the very nature of the universe. Every world spins in pain. If there is any kind of supreme being, I told myself, it is up to us all to become his moral superior.[12]

Tiffany, thankfully, will not be required to learn so harsh a lesson, but the four books about her do together form what German literary critics call a *Bildungsroman*, a novel recounting how its central character develops into maturity through experiences during childhood and youth. Her task is to become her grandmother's successor, a true witch of the Chalk, and to do this she has to learn the scope of her duty, the source and limits of her power, and her own strengths and flaws. It is her nature, and her destiny, that she should take responsibility – at first for her irritating little brother, but eventually, in *I Shall Wear Midnight*, for her whole community. Taking responsibility is a theme which runs through much of Terry's work, from light-hearted early books such as *Truckers* and its sequels, through the Witches series, to the profoundly moving *Nation*, which he considers to be the best book he has ever written.

Tiffany's strength is a reflection of Tiffany's land. This theme is made plain within the first two or three pages. Miss Tick realises that only a witch can defend the Chalk Country from the fairy world attacking it, but she thinks that: 'You can't grow a good witch on chalk. The stuff's barely harder than clay. You need good hard rock to grow a witch, believe me'.[13] But Tiffany *is* hard. When Jenny Greenteeth first attacks, she thinks 'I'm not at all scared, she thought. How strange. I ought to be scared, but I'm just angry. I mean, I can *feel* the scared, like a red-hot ball, but the angry isn't letting it out.'[14]

She sees Jenny's attack as an insult: 'How dare a monster turn up in the river? Who did it think she was?' And so she lures Jenny ashore, using Wentworth as bait, and clobbers her with a frying pan. This is brave, obviously, but could the underlying impulse be pride and selfish callousness? She does not love, or even like, Wentworth. In the course of the book several characters raise the issue, and clearly Tiffany's own conscience is uneasy. So the Queen tries to break Tiffany's spirit with accusations: that she is cold and heartless, that she used her own brother as monster bait, that she has come seeking him in fairyland through mere vanity, seeing herself in the role of heroine: 'You never loved him. You have a heart like a little snowball. I can see it. … Selfishness. Mine, mine, mine. All a witch cares about is what's *hers*.'[15]

Yet this accusation is unjust. Tiffany's motive is subtly but very importantly different, and in her heart she knows it. Earlier in the tale, as Tiffany and the Feegles paused on the borders of fairyland, William the gonnagle had said 'You must love your wee brother to face all these monsters for him', and Tiffany had thought to herself that she definitely did not, she found him an exasperating nuisance. But then she looked more deeply into her feelings:

> Her Second Thinking said: he's mine. My place, my home, my brother! How dare anything touch what's mine! She'd been brought up not to be selfish. She knew she wasn't, not in the way people meant. She tried to think of other people. She never took the last slice of bread. This was a different feeling. She wasn't being brave or noble or kind. She was doing this because it had to be done, because there was no way that she could not do it. She thought of … [16]

And it is at this point that Terry places Tiffany's memory of Granny Aching battling through frost or storm to rescue 'idiot sheep that never said thank you', forcing readers to notice and reflect upon the parallel, for this, though Tiffany does not yet fully realise it, is the solution to her problem and the moral heart of the book. There is indeed a sense in which it's true that 'all a witch cares about is what's hers', but not in the way the Queen means it. A witch cares about her land and its people because they are her responsibility; it

is her duty to defend and protect them. They are hers not because she owns them, but because she gives her life to caring for them.

Tiffany's quest for her brother leads her first into encounters with sinister creatures drawn from traditional folklore: the Headless Horseman, best known nowadays from the American *Legend of Sleepy Hollow* but also a fairly common type of British ghost; the grimhounds, fierce black dogs with fiery eyes which are said to haunt churchyards, a reference to the ill-omened Church Grim in British lore; and a swarm of very small flying fairies. These, however, are mere preliminaries. Her main ordeal, which takes up a third of the book, is her journey through the elvish domain that has superimposed itself over the real world of chalk and turf, a place of dreams within dreams, somewhere where all stories are real, all songs are true. As I need hardly say, it is utterly terrifying.

The 'portal' leading into this domain is a place between standing stones, as it was in Lancre in *Lords and Ladies*, but the domain itself echoes a picture. To Tiffany it is an illustration in a book of fairy tales, one of the few books her family owns; to us, it is a well-known mid-Victorian painting by Richard Dadd, in the Tate Gallery. It is complex, crowded, meticulously detailed, hyper-realistic, and rather unpleasant. A small elf with an axe is about to slice a hazelnut in half, watched by a crowd of fairies of various sizes, some of whom, so Tiffany thinks, look more like monsters; in the foreground a wizened little man sits hunched up, looking dazed and terrified (Terry calls him Sneebs, and says he is a human captive so damaged by fairyland that when he tried to return to the human world he could not bear it).

In traditional folklore, entrances to the otherworld are via some natural feature. One steps into a fairy ring, plunges into a pool or well, enters an enchanted wood, or finds a doorway opening into a mound or rock. And so it was in Shakespeare, for whom 'a wood near Athens' was the setting for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – a dream which, to the humans caught up in it, was a bewildering and painful nightmare. But in more recent literature we sometimes find fairy dream-worlds that owe little or nothing to nature. As I think of Tiffany struggling inside Dadd's painting, I am particularly reminded of Carroll's two *Alice* books, the first of which is built around a card game dominated by the tyrannical Queen of Hearts, and the second around a chaotic game of chess (for which Alice blames the Red Queen). We are so familiar with the surreal adventures and peculiar characters in the *Alice* books that perhaps we no longer notice how aggressively unpleasant most of them are, how they constantly criticise Alice, trying to bully her and undermine her self-confidence. Yet nothing seems to frighten or distress Alice, at least not for long. She passes coolly among these weird beings, wins most of her arguments with them, and eventually smashes their world quite easily. 'You're nothing but a pack of cards!' she cries at the end of *Wonderland*, and at the end of *Looking-Glass* she overturns the banqueting table and shakes the Red Queen till she turns into a mere kitten, just as Tiffany holds onto the shape-changing Queen

till she reveals her true, feeble form.

I have asked Terry whether he was deliberately echoing the *Alice* books, but he said he never particularly liked them and was not aware of making parallels. He added, however, that one should never underrate the power of narrativium, the imperative force which secretly determines the proper way a story should go. Story-patterns do tend to replicate themselves, with or without the story-teller's conscious decision.

For Tiffany, things are far less easy than for Alice. This is because on one level – a very important level – all but the earliest of Terry's books are realistic works, not fantasies. The realism is in the psychology: human and non-human characters alike are taken seriously as *people*. In Tiffany's case this means that alongside all her toughness and practical good sense she has areas of vulnerability and pain – grief for the loss of her grandmother, guilt that she did not show her grief, remorse for the stupidly tactless gift of the china shepherdess, guilt that she does not love her brother. The Queen hammers away at these areas, and comes near to breaking Tiffany's spirit:

> 'You left your little brother behind [to be drowned]. …
> 'You dream that you are strong, sensible, logical, the kind of person who always has a bit of string. But that's just your excuse for not being really, properly human. You're just a brain, no heart at all. You didn't even cry when Granny Aching died. You think too much, and now your precious thinking has let you down. Well, I think it's best if I just kill you, don't you?'[17]

But Tiffany has weapons too. One is her red-hot anger that the Queen, a creature 'whose only talent is control', should dare to take possession of the land which it is her duty to protect. Another is the memory of her own world, with its real turf, real shepherd's hut, real Jolly Sailor tobacco, all of which lead back to the powerful protective figure of Granny Aching. And behind Granny Aching is something even more ancient and powerful, the Chalk land itself. Tiffany's very name, the Kelda told her, means 'Land-under-Wave', signalling her profound link to the Chalk. Tiffany will no longer fear the ever-changing dreams or be tormented by self-doubt once she can truly say 'The land is in my bones,' 'Now I'm inside the chalk, like a flint, like a calkin.' It is when she fully understands this that she can finally defeat the Queen:

> She was tired. She felt as if she was watching herself from above and a little behind. She saw herself set her boots firmly on the turf, and then … and then …

> … and then, like someone rising from the clouds of a sleep, she felt the deep, deep Time below her. She sensed the breath of the downs and the distant roar of ancient, ancient seas trapped in millions of tiny shells. She thought of Granny Aching, under the turf, becoming part of the chalk again, part of the land under wave. She felt as if huge wheels of time and stars were turning slowly around her.
> She opened her eyes and then, somewhere inside, opened her eyes again.
> She heard the grass growing, and the sound of worms below the turf. She could feel the thousands of little lives around her, smell all the scents on the breeze, and see all the shades of the night …
> The wheels of stars and years, of space and time, locked into place. She knew exactly where she was, and what she was. …
> 'I have woken up,' she whispered. 'I have woken up and I am real. I know where I come from and where I am going. You cannot fool me any more. Or touch me. Or anything that is mine.'[18]

She can now see the Queen in her true form, small, weak, and baby-like, and she can pity her.

And so Tiffany has taken the first steps along the road which will lead to her becoming what the Feegles always knew she had it in her to be, the successor to her granny, the witch of the Chalk country. The spirit of Granny Aching briefly appears to applaud her victory, Granny Weatherwax and Nanny Ogg arrive to endorse her status, and Miss Tick admits that a witch can indeed grow on chalk, because within chalk is flint, hard and sharp and useful.

Most authors, I think, would have ended there, at the moment of Tiffany's triumph. Terry does not. Instead, he tells how in her own family and village nobody realises that she has saved her brother, and Roland, and her land. All the credit goes to Roland; it is taken for granted that because he is a boy, and a Baron's son to boot, it is *he* who has saved *her*. And, half unwillingly, he lets them think it. Tiffany accepts the situation, just as her Granny accepted that it was her duty to save 'idiot sheep that never said thank you and would probably be just as stupid tomorrow'.

This theme of doing one's duty without expecting gratitude is important in Terry's work. I observed this in the course of our collaboration on *The Folklore of Discworld*. At the close

of one section in the chapter on the Lancre witches, describing their epic struggles to defend their country against vampires and elves, and echoing Churchill's words about fighter pilots in the Battle of Britain, I wrote:

> Never, in the field of inter-species conflict, was so much owed by so many to so few. But do the people of Lancre appreciate this? Do they, hell! They don't even notice.[19]

To which Terry added the single sentence: 'Which is perhaps how it should be.'

## Jacqueline Simpson

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