Orkney Memories

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The Hogboon of Hell and Other Strange Orkney Tales, Nancy and W. Towrie Cutt. Illus. by Richard Kennedy. Andre Deutsch, 1979. 173 pp. $12.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-233-97020-7.

Anyone familiar with the work of W. Towrie Cutt is aware of his love for the Orkney Islands. Though he emigrated to Canada as a young man, this seventh son of an Orkney lobster fisherman has never forgotten the life and legends which defined his childhood, and thus in books like *Faraway World: an Orkney Boyhood* and *Message from Arkmae* he consciously attempts to define the uniqueness of the Orkney culture. His books, however, are not simply nostalgic glimpses into his past; they are also positive assertions of the value of his boyhood culture, for Cutt firmly believes that it can teach man a great deal about himself and, more importantly, about the world in which he lives. *Message from Arkmae* presents Cutt's premise most eloquently. Quite simply, if man does not learn to live with the world about him, he will destroy it and finally turn to the total destruction of his fellow man. He will become a cannibal.

Cutt's latest book, *The Hogboon of Hell and Other Strange Orkney Tales*, written in collaboration with his wife, Nancy Cutt, a noted scholar in Victorian children's literature, reasserts this life-long obsession with Orkney culture. As the title suggests, the book is a collection of Orkney legends, focusing particularly on the mysterious supernatural creatures who make the Orkney culture so unique.

Though the Cutts acknowledge an impressive list of scholars whose work has influenced and inspired their collection, their introduction clearly states that this is not an anthropological collection of variants of popular legends. Instead they present a series of stories which tell us not only about legendary Orkney monsters, but also about the day to day life of a small Orkney village. They expand brief episodes into complete stories, and most importantly they often create tales based on their vast knowledge of Orkney lore. Although I am not always fond of such recreations, particularly when I examine various modern treatments of the North American Indian culture, I find the Cutts' adaptations quite successful, for they have not tampered in any way with the Orkney mythology. Their imagined stories fit quite easily into the legendary world that one finds in more scholarly collections.

The Cutts' collection is divided into three sections. The first, entitled "Apparition and Gramarye," presents tales which deal with man's contacts with the spirits of the land, while the second, "The Sea Folk," provides a marvelous series of legends dealing with those beings who so dominate the Orkney culture. The third and final section, called "Echoes of the Sagas," contains two quasi-historical accounts of significant moments in Orkney history.

The major problem I find in the collection is the occasional tendency to focus far too much on the problems of the child protagonists of the stories rather than to present the legend itself. One tale, for example, which chronicles the miraculous appearance of St. Magnus during a battle between the Scots and the Orkney men, concentrates so intently on the day to day problems of the young boy telling the story that the saint's incredible appearance becomes somewhat anti-climactic. This concern with adapting legendary material to the confines of the child's adventure story is also a major problem in the first story in the collection, a far too long tale entitled "Nine Stones Wake." In it, Maggie Matches, the heroine, faces the age-old problem of learning to accept a new child in the family. Petulant, selfish Maggie does learn to accept her new brother, of course, largely because of her experiences with the awakening nine stones. In the climactic scene she saves the child from one of the stones and throws away the magical whistle which has called the stones back to life. The problem with this tale is that somehow the incredible mystery surrounding these magical stones never really comes alive, becoming lost somewhere in a tale which is, in fact, a traditional initiation tale. Fortunately, however, the majority of the tales in the collection do not follow a similar path, for they do focus on the legends themselves and the uniqueness of Orkney lore.

The tales of the land spirits are a marvelously varied lot, telling of horses who endlessly seek their dead masters, of husbands returning from the dead to release wives from foolish vows, and of witches who, despite great supernatural power, wilt under the goodness of Christian prayer. My favorite story in this section is the title story, the utterly delightful "The Hogboon of Hell." On a day like any other, ill fortune came to Robbie Cursitter and his family, for on that day a hogboon sleeping in a mound upon their property "woke up and began to pester them." Delightful as this goblin is, however, the figure who dominates the tale is Mr. McVicar, the new vicar of the area, who treats the Cursitters, his tenants, with so much contempt that they come to rename their property "Hell." The irony of this choice becomes obvious when the hogboon tires of the Cursitters and moves to a mound near the vicar's house and begins to make life miserable for the powerful churchman. Finally the vicar decides that his land must be exorcised, and he ritualistically condemns the pest to Hell itself. Luckily for the hogboon, Hell is only a few meters away, and the spirit returns to his former home with the Cursitters. But his stay with the vicar has totally reformed the hogboon, and he now appreciates the simple Cursitter clan so

much that "in their failing days the hogboon was a great boon to them."

It is in the section on the sea folk, however, that the Cutts are at their best. In a succession of brief, evocative tales they present a fascinating world of fin men, mermaids, and silkies, and explore the tenuous relationship between man and such magical creatures. They tell of the fin men's desire for human wives, presenting a variety of tales in which wives and sisters are spirited away by these legendary seducers. They also tell of humans who force creatures of the sea to live among men until that inevitable day when they must return to their true home. Perhaps the most moving instance of this unending desire to return to one's own world is found in a tale called "Rest in Peace." One day a fisherman discovers a mysterious young woman who demands that she be allowed to return with him. As he journeys home this woman grows older and older. When she arrives at Robbie's small village she is ancient. She only has time to say one Our Father before she topples "over in a little heap," but she has died with her own people.

The Cutts do not, however, suggest that the Christian world is superior to the world of the sea folk; they simply state that one must recognize that the two worlds exist, and that man must learn to accept and respect that which he does not understand. Nowhere are the benefits of such mutual respect more obvious than in a tale entitled "One Spared to the Sea." In it a fisherman who spares a seal pup is rewarded nine years later when the grown pup returns, in the form of a woman, to save the fisherman's children from certain drowning. Wisely the authors provide no final overt moral; it is obvious.

Despite my reservations about one or two of the Cutts' tales, I find the overall collection highly enjoyable, one which should both teach and delight almost any audience. Though the text is effectively illustrated by the sketches of Richard Kennedy, I find that it is the words themselves which bring the Orkney legends alive. I suspect, in fact, that the Cutts mean for the tales to be read aloud even to the very young, just as they were so long ago when they were first told.

The final tale in the collection tells of a boy's return 650 years into the past to witness the death of King Hakon Hakonson, the last of the great Norse kings. The Cutts' brief explanation for such a marvel is that, for one short moment, "two times had crossed and recrossed." I think this also summarizes the Cutts' accomplishment, for they return the reader to the ancient Orkney world and, for one far too brief moment, he is a part of that world. Time crosses and recrosses, with magical results.

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