

The Lore of the Landscape

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In this article, Simon provides food for thought as to the use of folk narratives about landscape in geography.

This article brings together two separate threads –geography and folklore – to consider specific geographical features. Inspired by the phrase ‘Owd Ma, brought tha bowder down in ‘er pinny’ from my home region of Cheshire. Specifically, the region where the magical sandstone ridge divides the county in two like a sedimentary backbone.

Folklore is an aspect of culture that is often forgotten, yet it permeates every community and individual. Like an accent or dialect, folklore is always regionally located: it lives organically within and as part of our cultures. It changes as time passes, sometimes dying and at others being created or reborn, but always carrying an individual or community’s identity. Folklore is a people’s cultural inheritance and, as an oral tradition, it is passed on and exists as myths, legends, ballads, dialect, and as folktales). This article is concerned with the latter: the folktale.

Robert MacFarlane expertly dissects the intimately woven connections between people and the descriptive terms of dialect for geographical features. He draws attention to the East-Anglian term ‘currel’ meaning a small stream, and the northern English term ‘keld’ referring to the ‘deep, still, smooth part of a river’ (MacFarlane, 2015). Lexicons like this now abound, and, locally, rarer collections include Leigh’s (1973) *A Glossary of Words used in the Dialect of Cheshire*. While the words themselves may offer a curious insight into a speaker’s identity, community and sense of belonging in a psychogeographical sense, it is perhaps in the stories and tales that are most effective in connecting an individual with their landscape. Often, there exists a symbiotic relationship between a person and their home landscape, which reveals itself in words. As a way of understanding of the world it is, for me, a heritage that can be explored and celebrated in childhood and in the classroom.

I am not the first to suggest that a peculiar power exists in our language as an inducement to who we are and where we belong. Alan Garner’s (1997) deftly crafted tales of Cheshire, which spoke to generations of people in the UK. His consideration of oral history and applied archaeology in East Cheshire goes further in discerning these relationships (Garner, 1997). Similarly, Ballin (2012) highlights the communication, thinking and social skills that can convey geographical knowledge.

In terms of a classroom practice, inviting members of the community to share their tales is one way for schools to learn about their locality. Pupils often have their own folk narratives too, which can prove equally rich (see Opie and Opie, 1959). However, in order to use oral tradition in the classroom, a summary of the differing perspectives will help us appreciate these relationships.

First, an example from oral tradition and an account of the origin of a particular feature of the Cheshire landscape (Figure 1: The folktale origin of ‘The Crag at Beeston’).

The Crag is the work of the Urchin. It started when the Urchin fell from grace, and landed in crumpled horny heap just outside Kelsall, at a place now called Urchin’s Kitchen. Well some time passed, and hungry and greedy as he is the Urchin started scrattin’ at the marl, needlin’ any snig, insect, worm or newt as scran and goblin’ it all up. He scatted and scatted until he was another good twenty foot under the ground. And begore, when the folks of Kelsall came across him from the racket of scrattin’ they’d heard. Realising him to be the Urchin they threw stones at him to shoo him away, and after a while he did go. He left awreet, but not without thoughts of revenge. And picking up a ginormous rock, flew up and up, only to drop the mighty thing on top of all the folk. But the greedy, vengeful Urchin had picked up a rock too big for even him to carry, and swaying this way and that he couldn’t fly straight and he dropped it far beyond his intention, at Beeston. And there it sits: Beeston Crag.

As with other place-based tales, such explanatory folktales are quite well known in Cheshire. Be they rural or urban, these oral traditions provide a creative arena for the teaching and learning of geography. You could also consider how such folk narratives of landscape are in danger of being lost through the domination by more ‘objective’ narratives (see also Dolan, pages **-* this issue). In a

sense, these are important ethnogeographies represented as oral traditions. Nevertheless, they can lose their worth on the page, as Figure 2 – an objective explanation for the location of Beeston Crag – indicates.

(Figure 2: An objective explanation for the location of Beeston Crag. Bowerman, 2008.)

The sedimentary rocks that form the sandstone ridge and the most notable part of it – Beeston Crag – were formed over many millennia via the disturbance of Earth's crust. The sandstone was pushed upwards as vertically fractured, or 'faulted', rock. The rock itself was formed in layers by the semi-arid desert-like conditions of the Triassic period some 225–195 million years ago, being interposed by flash floods. Thus, it is comprised of sandy layers and pebble beds, which over millennia were consolidated through compression and the cementation of minerals. These rocks were then gradually eroded during the Ice Age, leaving the harder strata of Triassic sandstone protruding above the Plain to create the extensive central ridged area of Cheshire known as the Sandstone Trail.

The latter point in Figure 2 on the Ice Age is of more interest to me. We can understand how Beeston Crag was formed geologically and Figure 1 indicates the psychogeographic importance people have placed upon it through the centuries. It is also easy to see how links to oracy, storytelling, drama and art can be used in the classroom to explore the Crag's formation. Less obvious are the other features in the tale and how people use the landscape today. For example, the Cheshire Plain at the end of the Ice Age (between 20,000 and 10,000 years ago) was left with an abundance of boulder clay, otherwise known as glacial till. As the ice sheet retreated, this formed a covering layer was lime- and mineral-rich clay (from deposits scoured from the seabed of the former Irish Sea – Northern Eye Books, 2012). Nowadays, the agriculture of the Cheshire plain owes a great deal to these clays – they provide farmers with a source of nutrients for crops. In the past workers dug large pits (known locally as *marl pits*) to remove the clay for fertilising sandy soils..

Urchin's Kitchen is another glacial feature with imposing and extraordinary contours that resulted from cavernous glacial drainage channels scoured out by huge boulders. This last oral tradition/landscape link leads me back to the introduction of my piece: 'Owd Ma's bowder', a sizeable granite boulder in a hedgerow at the foot of Beeston Crag. The boulder is particularly interesting in a folkloric sense because it alludes to a woman who must have been a giant to carry the sizable boulder from the top of the crag (as she allegedly did). In fact folktales of giants in England are rarer than those concerning the devil. The oral traditions of Wales, Ireland and Scotland being more readily maintained, and tales of giants tend to pervade in more mountainous regions (Westwood and Simpson, 2005). Consequently, although we find such local legends where the creators of landscape features are beyond the strength of normal people, these tend to be in places such as Westmorland, Cumberland and Cornwall. In Cornwall, for example, it is said that giants' favourite sport was to compete in the distance-throwing of granite boulders. Hence, to find a tale in Cheshire (a relatively flat region in England) about a giant was quite exciting. The geographic feature is, of course, due to the gradual retreat of the glacial ice sheet dropping 'foreign' boulders and pebbles across Cheshire. Termed 'glacial erratics' these volcanic or granite rocks are easily distinguishable from the local red sandstone, which makes some kind of logical sense as peculiarities of the region that these 'bowders' should become the focus of folk tales.

Links between oral traditions and geography can be made in any populated region of the world (see e.g. Westwood and Simpson, 2005). In the interest of developing the types of skills Ballin (2012) outlines, and to nurture each pupil's sense of place, connections should be made to enable their understandings of landscapes and how these relate to a local identity.

References

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