



carolynne
larrington

the land of the
GREEN man

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE SUPERNATURAL
LANDSCAPES OF THE BRITISH ISLES

I.B. TAURIS

About the Author

CAROLYNE LARRINGTON is Fellow and Tutor in Medieval English Literature at St John's College, Oxford. Her previous books include *The Woman's Companion to Mythology* (1997), *The Poetic Edda* (2008, second edition 2014), *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition* (I.B.Tauris, 2006, paperback 2015) and *Magical Tales: Myth, Legend and Enchantment in Children's Books* (2013).

About this Book

'The folklore of Britain abounds with local tales about the activities of one sort of supernatural being or another – giants, elves, hobs, boggarts, dragons or shape-changing witches.

The stories are vivid, dramatic and often humorous. Carolyne Larrington has made a representative selection, which she re-tells in a simple, direct way which is completely faithful to the style and spirit of her sources. Most collectors of local legends have been content merely to note how they may serve to explain some feature of the landscape or to warn of some supernatural danger, but Carolyne Larrington probes more deeply. By perceptive and delicate analysis, she explores their inner meanings. She shows how, through lightly coded metaphors, they deal with the relations of man and woman, master and servant, the living and the dead, the outer semblance and the inner self, mankind and the natural environment. Her fascinating book gives us a fuller insight into the value of our traditional tales.'

JACQUELINE SIMPSON, Visiting Professor of Folklore,
University of Chichester, and former President of
the Folklore Society, London

‘This delightful book makes terrific bedside reading, but should also be kept in the car for reference on drives through the English countryside. It combines a charmingly informal style with impressive learning, mixing personal anecdotes and retellings of local legends with a deep knowledge of the history and literature of our islands, and evocative descriptions of the landscape. Don’t leave home without it!’

ELIZABETH ARCHIBALD, Professor of English,
Durham University, co-editor of *The Cambridge Companion
to The Arthurian Legend*

‘Carolyne Larrington’s book takes the form of a personal journey, from Shetland and Orkney to Cornwall, from Ireland and the Isle of Man to East Anglia (with additional contextual references to neighbouring countries such as France, Iceland and Norway), underlining the degree to which folk legends and beliefs continue to shape the cultural landscape that the people of the British Isles inhabit in the twenty-first century. As well as encountering a wide miscellany of supernatural beings with ancient roots, readers are given a deft and highly readable introduction to the beliefs and narratives that have long been associated with these beings in British folk culture over the course of time. *The Land of the Green Man* is a labour of love – a blend of lively storytelling and literary analysis – drawing on a knowledge that has evolved not only from personal experience but also decades of learning and teaching, passing on these accounts to students orally just like the storytellers of the past. Whether readers are interested in the land itself, or in the culture it has produced over centuries, which continues to give the land character and depth for those who walk across it, they cannot help but realise the degree to which ancient folklore of various kinds continues to shape the environment in which we live.’

TERRY GUNNELL, Professor of Folkloristics, University
of Iceland, author of *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*

THE LAND OF THE GREEN MAN

*A Journey through the Supernatural
Landscapes of the British Isles*

CAROLYNE LARRINGTON



I.B. TAURIS

LONDON · NEW YORK

*For my god-daughters, Sophie, Cara and Romy,
and also for Julia, Eleanor and Henry*

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INTRODUCTION

Giants, trolls, kelpies, brownies, goblins, imps; wood, tree, mound, and water spirits; heath-people, hill-watchers, treasure-guards, good people, little people, pishogues, leprechauns, night-riders, pixies, nixies, gnomes, and the rest – gone, all gone! I came into England with Oak, Ash and Thorn, and when Oak, Ash and Thorn are gone I shall go too.

Rudyard Kipling, *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906)

IT'S A WARM AUGUST BANK HOLIDAY WEEKEND, and I'm lying on thick sheep-nibbled turf. Cotton-wool cumulus clouds are sailing over the valley in the mild summer breeze; the dog is lying on her back too, wriggling ecstatically as the smell of crushed grass fills her sensitive snout. Just below us on the hillside are families: mums, dads, older and younger children, and groups of friends. They're all hard at work, piling powdered white chalk onto a huge outline carved on the hillside, in a tradition that goes back many centuries. It's the Scouring of the White Horse, that wonderfully elegant chalk figure that lies along White Horse Hill, high above the Oxfordshire vale to which it gives its name.

Nearly three thousand years old, the Horse is visible from the Great Western railway as it runs from Didcot to Swindon, if you know where to look for it. The Scouring of the Horse is now a decorous family-centred affair organised by the National Trust, but a hundred and fifty years ago all the local villages

would be involved in scrubbing up their famous landmark. Every seven years there was a Scouring Festival. Its highlights included horse races up the hill to the Ridgeway at the top, and the excitement of bowling a huge cheese down the valley known as the Manger – if you caught the cheese you could keep it. But you could also try your luck at climbing a greasy pole for a leg of mutton, wrestling and fighting with sticks, running races; the men would look forward to the ‘running for a peg [pig] too, and they as could ketch ’un and hang ’un up by the tayl, had ’un’. And the girls, too, would ‘run races for smocks’, or so an account from 1859 tells us. When all this athleticism was over, the evening was passed in dancing, singing, poetry contests, drinking and storytelling. We owe this description to Thomas Hughes, author of *Tom Brown’s School Days*, who was a proud Berkshire man (the White Horse lay in Berkshire before the county boundaries were redrawn) and someone who deeply loved its hills, valleys and fields and the stories they contain.

The White Horse isn’t the only ancient site to be found within these few square miles of what’s now South Oxfordshire. There’s Uffington Castle – not a castle at all, but an Iron Age hill fort, and the ancient Ridgeway, often called Britain’s oldest road. The Ridgeway has been walked for five thousand years, taking folk from coast to coast: for it originally ran from the Wash to the Dorset shore, passing close to the ancient mysteries of Stonehenge and Silbury Hill. Barrows and chamber graves – Scutchamer Knob near East Hendred, an Iron Age round barrow, and Wayland’s Smithy, a Bronze Age chamber grave – lie on the Ridgeway: the Smithy’s only a mile along the track, hedged with fresh-smelling hawthorn and pinkish-white dog rose, from where I am now, up above the Horse. And, as well as these man-made homes for the dead, there are dramatic natural features: the Manger, a steep glaciated valley with oddly stepped sides known as the Giant’s Steps, and Dragon Hill, a smaller rounded chalk tump, where white chalky patches show through the turf. This is where St

George slew the dragon; the patches show where its poisonous blood seared through the grass.

History and prehistory have written all across this little patch of South Oxfordshire landscape. Our ancestors have long walked here; from those unknown tribespeople who tramped out the Ridgeway route, to the Anglo-Saxons who did battle against the great Viking army at Ashdown, and the merrymakers of Woolstone, Uffington and Compton Beauchamp who chased after the squealing pig at the Scouring. For me, the White Horse is a magical place, a spot where the presence of the past and the generations who've gone before us seem still to be sensed. More interesting to me, though, than the archaeology and history of hill fort and tumulus are the stories that are attached to them. These are tales rooted in a particular earth, which have blossomed forth, over the years, in different forms. So, as I gaze down on Dragon Hill, I conjure up that brave young knight in his silver-shining armour on his proud white horse which echoes the figure on the hillside above. The tall, still princess stands waiting for him, holding her breath in the tremulous hope that she may after all live to see sunset, and the great gleaming green serpent glides forward; its vast scarlet mouth is agape and the bright sunshine bounces off its dazzling array of teeth. The figures are frozen in the moment when there's still all to play for, before the dragon lunges, the horse rears, and George's sword strikes home.

The legend of George and the Dragon is an international story, told of many places from Cappadocia all the way to Uffington; the tales associated with the Horse on the other hand are as local as they come. The Horse, so the antiquarians of the nineteenth century believed, was only fifteen hundred years old. It had been carved into the hillside in imitation of the horses on Anglo-Saxon battle standards in order to commemorate the victory of Prince, later King, Alfred over the grim Scandinavian invaders, followers of the raven banner, at Ashdown in 871. We now know from new archaeological dating techniques that the

lowest levels of chalk were laid down between around 1200 and 800 BCE, so the carving is much older than Alfred's day. But one of the other things we know is that once a year the Horse rises up and gallops to graze its fill from the manger and quench its thirst in the river. Knowing the Horse's age and knowing the tale of the Horse's habits: these are two crucially different modes of understanding the British landscape, both its past and its present. 'They thought as there was something to find there, / But couldn't find it, by digging, anywhere', comments an old countryman in Edward Thomas's poem of 1917, 'Lob', which lovingly celebrates English folk tradition. The archaeologists excavate their sherds, their bones and metalwork, but they won't uncover the names, traditions and stories which 'Lob' preserves. And it's that 'something' that they were looking for, that second kind of knowing, that this book is interested in.

The breeze is growing a little cooler now, and the sun is sinking lower beyond the western end of the Vale. The dog has stopped her wriggling and she's wagging her tail expectantly; she's ready to trot back to the car and head for home. I live at quite the other end of Oxfordshire, not in the Vale of the White Horse, but near the Vale of the Red Horse, a broad, fertile valley which lies now in Warwickshire. The Red Horse, another giant landscape figure, cut this time in clay, is first mentioned in 1607 by the antiquary William Camden in his *Britannia*. The Red Horse has been lost, recut and lost again several times and it's not to be seen any longer. At least five horses are known to have been carved into different hillsides across the Vale; the outline of the oldest one can still be seen quite clearly from the air, if viewed at the right angle and in the right light.

As well as the vanished Red Horse, about whom no stories survive, my part of Oxfordshire also lies close to the Rollright Stones, a group of three Neolithic stone monuments: the Kingstone, the Whispering Knights and the Kingsmen stone circle. These do have a tale, as their descriptive names suggest: the stones are none other than a transformed king and his army.

Men, knights and king were on their path of conquest, heading north and west towards the village of Long Compton in the valley below. But just before they crested the brow the king met a witch, who held the territory across which the army was marching. She prophesied to the king, 'Seven long strides shalt thou take, and if Long Compton thou canst see, King of England thou shalt be!' The arrogant king, who thought that he was almost at the top of the hill, replied, fatally, 'Stick, stock, stone, as King of England I shall be known!' And he took seven long strides forward. But he had reckoned without the long mound of earth that lay just before the edge of the slope – which you can still see lying beyond the Kingstone today. And since he had failed, the witch turned him into the very stone that he had sworn by in his boast. The Whispering Knights, who stand at some distance, lower down the hill to the east, behind both king and his men, are the remains of a dolmen. They lean conspiratorially towards one another, plotting rebellion perhaps against the overweening king, and that's why they were lagging behind. The Kingstone stands well ahead of his army on the other side of the Rollright road; as is often the case with stone circles, it's said that if you count the Kingsmen you'll never get the same result twice.

Local legend also insists that the stones must never be moved. A farmer once dragged a stone down the hill to incorporate in his barn, but the rock was almost too heavy to lift into his cart and the oxen pulling the wagon were reluctant to move. Only the whip got them down the hill, and when they finally came to the farm all three beasts dropped dead and the wagon crumbled into pieces. Notwithstanding this ill omen, the farmer manoeuvred the stone into place as a lintel in his barn, and from that day on his luck deserted him. Soon he had no beasts left at all, only one poor old nag, and, now believing the warnings he'd ignored, he decided to take the accursed rock back. Up went the stone into his battered old wagon that had seen better days; the old horse was harnessed to it and the beast trotted up the hill



FIG. 1 The Witch of Compton, a temporary installation by David Gosling.

again, as lively as a four-year-old. Once the stone was dropped back in its place, the farmer's heart lightened, his luck turned and soon he was rich as ever he was. And no one ever meddled with the Stones again.

The legend of the Stones is in outline a common one: a supernatural power turns arrogant humans into stones for their folly or sin. But the tale of the king and the witch also has something to say about masculine ambition and sense of entitlement, and about female resistance. It also highlights the power of words, particularly when framed as prophecies or vows, and there's a clear moral of not counting your chickens before they're hatched. The king was overreaching himself, as his Whispering Knights suspected. Underestimating the power of the witch, the protective female figure who was looking after her land, he falls into the trap of making a bargain with the supernatural without fully considering the terms. Serves him right! When I was up at the Stones a couple of summers ago I saw that the witch had returned. Made of woven saplings by the local artist David Gosling, she stood 8 feet tall or so atop the fateful mound that stood between the king and his glory. One spiky arm pointed

threateningly towards the king, while her right arm stretched behind her back, gesturing down towards Long Compton.

Sadly, the sculpture has now been dismantled, and this year only a pile of withies and poles remained where she previously stood. But the encounter between the flexible, female woven form and the stubborn stone figure was extremely effective. Gosling's Witch, as we'll see, is just one of the many temporary wooden or wicker sculptures which spring up in the British landscape in dialogue with the stories of the past.

These Oxfordshire places and their stories, the White Horse and the Rollright Stones, have become increasingly important to me over the more than thirty years I've been living in the county; they symbolise the landscape that I now call home. I don't come from here though – as a 'forces brat', as we children of the military call ourselves, I don't come from anywhere at all. By the time I was eighteen I'd lived in ten different places (and thirteen different houses); I've often envied my husband and his family their strong sense of identity, of truly belonging to their own patch of south-east London. Many of us in this age of migration – to the town from the village, to the city, or to another country altogether – have lost contact with the landscape where we first noticed the hills and trees, heard the birdsong and spotted the shy wild animals skulking in the hedgerows. But our yearning to belong somewhere, to find a space to call home, is an enormously powerful human drive, and the strength of our bonds with the land, even with the city streets, should never be underestimated.

And strong too is our longing to be told stories, tales which draw their energy from the places where we live or where we travel. The land, as in the little tale of the White Horse and the Manger, generates anecdotes in order to explain its features. Other kinds of stories have sprung up in different parts of these islands: tales of supernatural figures and their interactions with the humans who live in these strange and magical places. Many of these tales are centuries old. In the nineteenth century it

was thought that they were in danger of being lost. Enthusiastic collectors of local lore, parsons, squires, university scholars, doctors, and ladies of the manor all made it their business to ask the ordinary folk about these tales, to write them down in forms which ranged from plain yarns to sentimentalised romances, and to preserve them in stout four-volume sets, which have long languished on library shelves. The same impetus brought into existence the Folklore Society, founded in 1878, which studies popular culture: not just stories, but songs, dances, crafts, superstitions and customs.

Once they were gathered into the academy (though contributors to the journal *Folklore* came from all walks of life), there was a risk that these stories would be regarded as quaint, outmoded, records of superstition which no longer had any relevance to the modern age. It was feared, as Puck laments in the epigraph at the beginning of this section, that the supernatural creatures of Britain in all their variety and abundance would disappear. Not that they'd take ship to leave England for ever, but they'd vanish into libraries, locked up in leather covers, to become the preserve of the kinds of mad-eyed enthusiasts parodied by novelists such as Kingsley Amis or Angus Wilson. But, unexpectedly perhaps, the stories fought back. Kipling knew their power and retold them to reinforce his particular ideas about English identity at the very height of the British Empire, when so many Britons both lived and died at the other side of the world from their homeland. In the universities, particularly at Oxford, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis were harnessing their love of medieval literature with its rich mythologies and dramatic legends to a realisation that the great heroic legend cycles had their counterparts in the local and the individual. For Tolkien and Lewis, and those writers of fantasy who came after them, understood that British folk legends and the supernatural creatures who inhabit them have important things to say about human existence. Thinking about life and death, about children and animals, about riches and poverty, about love and desire,

past and future: all this is work that can be accomplished through hearing, reading and considering our traditional tales. What these stories preserve isn't straightforward magical thinking, the superstition and peasant foolishness that the clergyman collectors of the nineteenth century decried. Nor is it the beautiful lie, the romance of the 'beautiful and impossible things' that Oscar Wilde imagined: the Hippogriff 'champing his gilded oats' and dragons who 'wander about the waste places', the ornamental exotic that Wilde celebrates in his defence of aestheticism, 'The Decay of Lying' (1891).

Rather, I argue, the legends of our past offer particular kinds of answers – beautiful and mysterious answers as Wilde would agree – to very large questions through a kind of metaphorical thinking, through structures and patterns which, in their stripped-down clarity, show us what's really important in an unfamiliar light.

It's tempting to see that summer day in the early 1930s when Tolkien found himself scribbling 'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit' on the back of an exam paper as a kind of tipping point for British folklore and fantasy writing. Before Tolkien,

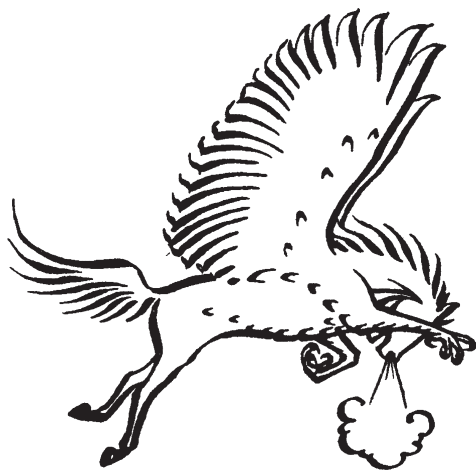


FIG. 2 The Hippogriff.

there were antiquarians and academics, amateur and professional folklorists who collected up traditional tales, and writers who drew on the lore of their own counties to add colour to their novels or who incorporated the legendary supernatural into their own kinds of mysticism and romanticism. The unexpected appearance of Pan in Kenneth Grahame's 1908 children's classic *The Wind in the Willows* shows us how some writers might appropriate legends in a way which could risk sentimentality or feyness. After Tolkien, though, there came a slew of writers – from C.S. Lewis to Diana Wynne Jones, to Philip Pullman, Neil Gaiman and, above all, J.K. Rowling – who have called up the creatures of British folklore to take centre stage in their writings, and who, as we'll see, have reshaped the legends and their characters to explore perennially vital themes: life, death and everything in-between. Giants, selkies, hobs, mermaids, wild men, knockers, werewolves and, above all, fairies remain good to think with and good to feel with – they tap into our concerns, anxieties, questions about being human and about how we live now, in this land.

Nor are our cities no-go zones for the creatures of folklore. As we'll see, mighty giants guard the City of London and march regularly through Liverpool; the terrible black Padfoot stalks through the garth of Wakefield Cathedral; and a baby-eating giant called Tarquin lived in the castle which gives its name to Castlefield in Manchester, until Sir Lancelot brought him to justice. And in consequence, according to this legend, if not to the etymologists and place-name experts, Lancashire takes its name from Queen Guenevere's bold French lover. In St Andrew's churchyard in Rodney Street, Liverpool, entombed within a pyramid, sitting bolt upright at a card table with a winning hand laid out before him, is William Mackenzie. The gambling man hopes to thwart the pact he made with the Devil in order to get that very winning hand, for he agreed to render his soul to the Evil One the moment he was laid in earth. Old Nick is still waiting for it. And perhaps, as Neil Gaiman has imagined for

America in his great novel *American Gods* (2001), new gods and creatures are beginning to take up new homes within the British legendary. Gaiman's 2005 novel *Anansi Boys* brings the West African spider- and trickster-god via the Caribbean to the streets of London; Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* series imagines a new black Mother Thames who has taken over the tidal reach of the river from Old Father Thames, and whose daughters, saucy nymphs and severe demi-goddesses, are the lost rivers of London: Tyburn, Effra, Fleet and Beverley Brook. Hybridising old traditions of the supernatural with new figures drawn from London's immigrant communities is a bold, interesting move on the part of these two fantasy writers. Gaiman, as we shall see, has a deeper and more sustained understanding of folklore as a vehicle for important metaphysical themes than does Aaronovitch, whose novels are enjoyably witty rather than profound.

Twenty or more years ago, I used to teach short courses on the myths and legends of the British Isles, for ever since I was a child I've been fascinated by stories of gods, heroes, giants and other-world creatures, and I relished the chance to dig down into the folk tales and beliefs of Britain. My students and I were not so much interested in sources, parallels or transmission – not the mapping and categorisation of folklore – but, rather, we wanted to probe into what these stories mean, what they were for. What kind of work did they do for the people who told and retold them? How did they use these tales to think about what was important in their lives? And, we asked ourselves, how do they speak to us today? Back in those days there were a few authors who'd studied English in Oxford and who were steeped in medieval literature and folklore traditions: Alan Garner and Susan Cooper among them. But we didn't foresee the rise of Harry Potter and the dawning of the day when all the creatures of British folklore could be found on Tolkien and Lewis wikis and the Potter encyclopedia. In writing this book, I have gone back to the collections of folk tales, in the old nineteenth-century editions, now very often available online, and to the

more modern selections of tales which are listed in this book's 'Further Reading' section. I focus on supernatural beings, those unseen forces which have dealings with us mortals and which change our destinies. And I've brought in too those modern revisitings in a range of poems and novels: ones which I've read and enjoyed, and which have renovated and made relevant once again our folklore heritage in these islands.

Puck's 'Giants, trolls, kelpies and brownies' are still very much with us today, in literature, in film and television adaptations and on the multitude of websites that map the country's folklore. And they're also astonishingly alive in our imaginations. We mostly all know now what house-elves are like, how to lay vampires and werewolves, how to bargain with a fairy, and when to keep away from black dogs. We've learned how to distinguish between a troll, a trow and a giant: distinctions which only professional folklorists would have understood eighty years ago. And if you *don't* know the difference between a troll and a trow, this book will be your guide. Our wanderings will take us the length and breadth of the British Isles, to Ireland, Shetland and Man, from Cornwall to the Highlands, from Stornoway to Suffolk.

In the first chapter we'll see how the land came to be formed and made fit for humans to live in, and learn about those kingdoms which have vanished for ever. Chapter 2 leads us into the forest and to fairyland, teasing out the differences between lust, love and the loss that love so often entails. Death, darkness, devil hounds and white ladies who breach the boundary between living and dead are faced in Chapter 3. In the fourth chapter we'll open up the account book of gain and loss: riches can be won and squandered with the supernatural's help, power seized and maintained, or frittered away. The beast and the human – the animal with knowing human eyes, the beast that lurks within human form – are found in Chapter 5. Met with by land and sea, these hybrid creatures raise troubling questions about what it really means to be human, how we deal with our animal

aspects and with the other creatures that share the land with us. The last chapter looks both backwards and forwards, reflecting on how the past returns in the present, and how we imagine the future: the domain of our children and our children's children. Here at last we'll meet the Green Man, that figure both ancient and modern who has stepped down from the bosses and capitals of our ancient cathedrals into our contemporary consciousness to warn of our planet's precarious future if we won't learn the lessons the stories tell. And now let our journey begin.

ONE

THE LAND OVER TIME

HERE WAS ONCE A GIANT who lived high up in the Welsh Brecon Beacons. For reasons lost in the mists of time, he became embroiled in a feud with the citizens of Shrewsbury and decided to make an end of his foes. Intending to dam the River Severn, to flood the town and drown its inhabitants, the giant dug up a great mass of earth and carried it off on his spade. But by the time he got close to Wellington in Shropshire he was very tired and somewhat lost. By chance he met a cobbler with a large sack of shoes for repair, walking home from Shrewsbury along the road. The cobbler asked the giant where he was bound, with his mighty spadeful of earth, and the giant revealed his plan. The cobbler was appalled at the idea that all his prosperous Shrewsbury customers might be annihilated, so, thinking on his feet, he showed him the contents of his sack. ‘You’ll never make it to Shrewsbury, neither today nor tomorrow’, he explained. ‘Why, I’ve worn out all these shoes just coming from Shrewsbury!’ The weary giant changed his mind and dumped his spade-load at the side of the road, thus forming the great hill of the Wrekin in the Shropshire Marches. Pausing only to scrape the excess earth off his boots – the smaller hill known as the Ercall – the giant stumped off home. Like many of his kind, this giant was extremely large and none too bright, but he does his job in this tale: to explain the appearance of an extraordinary landscape feature. Just as the anthropologist Mary Douglas described dirt as ‘matter in the wrong place’, so the

Wrekin and the Ercall seem wrong in scale, in comparison to their flatter, less dramatic surroundings. So someone *must* have put them there. The clever cobbler, by the way, appears widely in folk-tale tradition, cunningly heading off potential enemies from towns or cities. In the Norse *Saga of Ragnar Shaggy-Breeches*, the ferocious Viking sons of Ragnar are persuaded to abandon their expedition to sack Rome by just such a ruse.

Engineering the Landscape

Giants provide an answer to the question: How did the land come to be this way? Huge natural features like the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, and, in Manx legend, the channels between the Calf of Man and the islet of Kitterland, and between Kitterland and the Isle, are outcomes of giant conflict: in the Manx case a battle between a native ogre, the Buggane, and the giant Finn mac Cool, whom we shall meet below.

Since they are often violent and prone to pique, giants throwing things about in rage can cause significant changes in the environment. British giants, like the Titans of Greek legend, or the Norse giants to whom they are quite closely related,



FIG. 3 The Calf of Man and the islet of Kitterland.

account for huge land features; the mighty, desolate mountains and glaciers of central Norway are known as Jotunheim (Land of Giants). The giants symbolise the geological and ecological processes which have shaped the British landscape in the past, mostly those associated with erosion, and volcanic or glacial formations. These features come about very slowly, at the pace of geological time, but the tale of the Wrekin's origin reminds us that the potentiality for dramatic land change is by no means dormant; the Severn's floods are nowadays constrained by flood defences, but, as the inundations of the last few years have warned us, these man-made barriers cannot always hold back the water. Safety from the turbulent power of the river when it rises is by no means assured, and communities who live with the threat of danger do well to anticipate the impact of huge, unseen and hard-to-tame natural forces.

The outlines of the giants themselves are rarely visible in the land, apart from such huge man-made figures as the Giant of Cerne Abbas and the Long Man of Wilmington, now thought to have been carved in the 1700s. We'll find John Gordon's fictional land-giant, from his popular children's book *The Giant under the Snow*, lumbering into dangerous life in Chapter 6. Although giants' graves, or the monuments (like Stonehenge) which they set up, are quite identifiable, their builders aren't thought of as slumbering under the earth as some giants do in other traditions. The lack of active volcanic geology, and the relative rareness of earthquakes and lesser seismic tremors, may account for the lack of restless and turbulent sleeping giants in these islands.

The Giant Builders

High up on the North Yorkshire moors above the little town of Whitby, where for many years I was at school, lies an ancient paved road or causeway, crossing the thick purple heather of Wheeldale Moor. A gently sloping embankment paved on top with flagstones runs for about a mile. Sounds like a Roman road,

you might say, and perhaps one that originally linked up with the Roman road remains near Pickering and Flamborough, connecting outlying camps with the garrison at Malton. Archaeologists have thought so too, though a more ancient origin in the Neolithic period has more recently been suggested. But folk around Whitby know differently: the land feature is Wade's Causey (Causeway), and its builders were not Roman legionaries or ingenious Britons, but rather a pair of vigorous giants.

Wade and his wife Bell lived up on the moors where they were assiduous builders and improvers. They are credited with building Pickering Castle and the earliest castle at Mulgrave, near Lythe, just north of Whitby. The Causey was built to link the two castles, say some tales; others suggest that, given the unpromising grazing on the moors, the couple kept their cow some distance away down the sloping moor side. Wade laid down the Causey so that Bell wouldn't have to squelch her way through the bogs in order to milk the beast. A giant rib from Bell's cow (in reality a whale jawbone) was displayed during the eighteenth century at Mulgrave Castle and curious visitors would carve their initials on it. The two giants had only one hammer between them for their building work; this they threw from one site to the other, hollering to warn their spouse that the hammer was coming. Bell used to carry loose stones in her apron and often dropped them on her way to one or other castle; this explains the numerous cairns and stone piles which dot the moorland. A standing stone along the A174 between Whitby and Loftus was previously known as Wade's Grave; there was once a second stone standing near it which marked the grave's extent.

Wade the giant is mentioned in some medieval written texts, though they don't tell us a huge amount about him. The earliest is the Old English poem *Widsith* (Far Traveller) in which the speaker Widsith notes that Wade ruled over a Scandinavian tribe, the Helsingas. A later Scandinavian saga records him as Vadi; according to the fourteenth-century *Saga of Thidrek*, he was the son of King Vilkinus and a mermaid. Vadi grows up a