

BOOK REVIEW

Jeremy Harte. *Cloven Country: The Devil and the English Landscape*

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When even the contents are written with panache (“Off in a Sheet of Flame,” “Amid the Shrieking of the Storm,” and so on), you know the book is going to be enjoyable—and Jeremy Harte’s *Cloven Country: The Devil and the English Landscape* does not disappoint. In his characteristically eloquent, erudite, and often humorous style, folklorist and museum curator Harte takes us on a partly illustrated journey across the English (and occasionally Welsh and Irish) landscape, sharing stories of how its features, both the uncanny and mundane, from the stone circle to the dank ditch, have been shaped and colored by the Devil’s many misdeeds.

From the outset, a distinction is made between the Devil of popular stories and the Devil of theological sermons—two very different characters. Harte recognizes a spectrum of Devils ranging from the carelessly cheerful and mischievously malicious to the dreadful and forbidding. This book largely recounts the exploits of the former, “for anyone who likes good-humoured drama,” posits Harte (9). Here we have the Devil who takes playful, almost juvenile, pleasure in throwing stones at churches, in spoiling blackberries by spitting on them, and in exploiting the unwitting dealmaker. Here is the Devil who punishes the boastful, the adulterer, and the wicked not out of theological obligation, but because he quite enjoys it. This is also the shapeshifter Devil, who appears as a dog in one story, as a bird in another, and as a badger in another. A strong, supernatural Devil, who appears in storms, sinks ships, and turns sinners into stone. But this is not an indomitable Devil. He can be beaten in battles of wit, he can be tricked and cheated, and as Harte’s seventh chapter on the many maidens and mothers who overcome the Devil demonstrates, “Woman’s Wit is Better than Man’s” (167).

Many other supernatural creatures are also often associated with the English landscape, and these are not overlooked by Harte. But they are presented as the cousins and occasional precursors to the Devil, who takes center-stage here. Harte demonstrates how the Devil stepped into the shoes of the fae in Surrey and a giant in Shropshire, for instance; how the same stories told of the Devil in one region might be told of fairies or boggarts elsewhere. Expertly drawing on primary sources, such as maps from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, Harte uncovers the often surprisingly late coinage of Devil placenames, from the Devil’s Dyke in Brighton to the Devil’s Chapel in the Forest of Dean and the Devil’s Bathtub in Rawtenstall. The Devil, it transpires, has given his name to numerous churchyards, stones, bridges, causeways, and woods throughout the country, as well as having scattered his kitchens, gardens, armchairs, wheelbarrows, elbows, thumbs, drinking bowls, frying pans, and apron-strings across the landscape. No region is without a piece

of the Devil's furniture, wardrobe, or body part. Accordingly, *Cloven Country* will no doubt become a well-thumbed travel companion for many wanderers and wonderers of the English landscape. Before visiting a site, you can consult the book's handy index to see if your travel destination is blessed with its own demonic narrative.

However, *Cloven Country* is far more than a travel guide. Harte is not only concerned with identifying these dots on a map and rehashing their origin stories, but also with unpicking these stories. Questions weave their way in-between narratives, so as well as being treated to an entertaining read, we also delve into some insightful thinking about the history of folklore. But this is not a dense, academic analysis, heavy with theories and references. Harte is less concerned with providing answers himself, and more with posing the questions and inviting his readers to ponder them. Why is the Devil aligned with night? What connections are we witnessing between the Christian Devil and the supernatural creatures of the pagan past? Why do some stories travel while others are stationary, fixed to one place? And why does the Devil wear an apron anyway?

The only element I feel was missing from this book was a map, plotting the locations discussed. There would be no need to claim this as a comprehensive catalogue of Devil place-names—that is not the point of the book—but it would be useful to see how widespread they are across the country, especially for any readers unfamiliar with English geography. It may also reveal a bias toward the southern counties of England, which may or may not reflect the regions Harte is most familiar with. Despite this criticism, *Cloven Country* is a thoroughly enjoyable read—amusing and percipient in equal measure—which will appeal to anyone with an interest in landscape and the stories we tell about it. Harte hopes “it will be a damned good read” (9)—he did not hope in vain.