KATHARINE BRIGGS: COLLECTED WORKS

THE FOLKLORE OF THE COTSWOLDS

Katharine Briggs

KATHARINE BRIGGS
COLLECTED WORKS

VOLUME IX

THE FOLKLORE OF THE COTSWOLDS

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1974 by B T Batsford Ltd

This edition published 2003
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

Typeset in Times New Roman by
Keystroke, Jacaranda Lodge, Wolverhampton
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0–415–29147–X (Set)
ISBN 0–415–29156–9 (Volume IX)

Publisher's Note
The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original book may be apparent.

THE FOLKLORE OF THE COTSWOLDS

Katharine M. Briggs

The Folklore of the Cotswolds

Katharine M. Briggs

Drawings by Gay John Galsworthy

Foreword

THE COTSWOLDS, running through the eastern part of Gloucestershire and overlapping into the nearby counties, lack administrative unity but are an area of marked economic, social and cultural identity. Uplands averaging 600 to 700 feet, their name indicates earlier afforestation, though sheep-rearing and quarrying brought the wealth which later shaped the district's character, with its wool-trading towns and stone buildings. The old forest survives only in Wychwood.

Wychwood Forest lies in the Oxfordshire Cotswolds, the corner of the county where Katharine Briggs herself lives. At Burford, her home for many years, she works in her lovely house, surrounded by an extensive folklore library. Her literary output, spread over forty years, has included poetry, plays and fiction, as well as her outstanding books on folklore. *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales* (1970–1), a definitive work of reference comprising four large volumes, was the result of ten years solid research and has been internationally acclaimed. This was her seventh major work on folklore and now, in her 76th year, she has followed it with *The Last of the Astrologers* and the present volume.

I had the honour and pleasure of editing the *Festschrift* published on her 75th birthday (*The Witch Figure*; 1973) and the Appreciation contributed by Ruth Michaelis-Jena pointed to 'the world Katharine Briggs is concerned with, and to which she has introduced so many so successfully.' Writing of her myself, six years earlier, I referred to 'a lightness of touch unusual in eminent scholars.' Dr Briggs herself said, during a radio interview following publication of the *Festschrift*: 'Scholars didn't take folklore seriously because there has been a lot of very inferior writing on the subject', and, endorsing Peter Opie's view, she described folklore as 'the Cinderella of all the sciences.'

It is a historical coincidence that, over 200 years ago, Maria Edgeworth was born only a few miles from Burford. Percy Newby wrote of Miss Edgeworth's 'dignified and shrewd peasantry', and Katharine Briggs, whose own fictional works often draw on folkloric material, shows a similar unwavering respect for her subject matter. *Rackrent Castle* inspired the Waverley novels, and Scott mentions Maria Edgeworth in his 1814 postscript. These in turn, as Professor Dorson neatly puts it, 'sired books of tradition', and

when folklore grew into a serious study later in the same century, 'books of tradition' became the norm. By contrast, Katharine Briggs, especially in her books on the 17th century, has applied her erudition and literary skill to demonstrating the breadth of our subject, and that folklore is not a fossil irrelevant to everyday life.

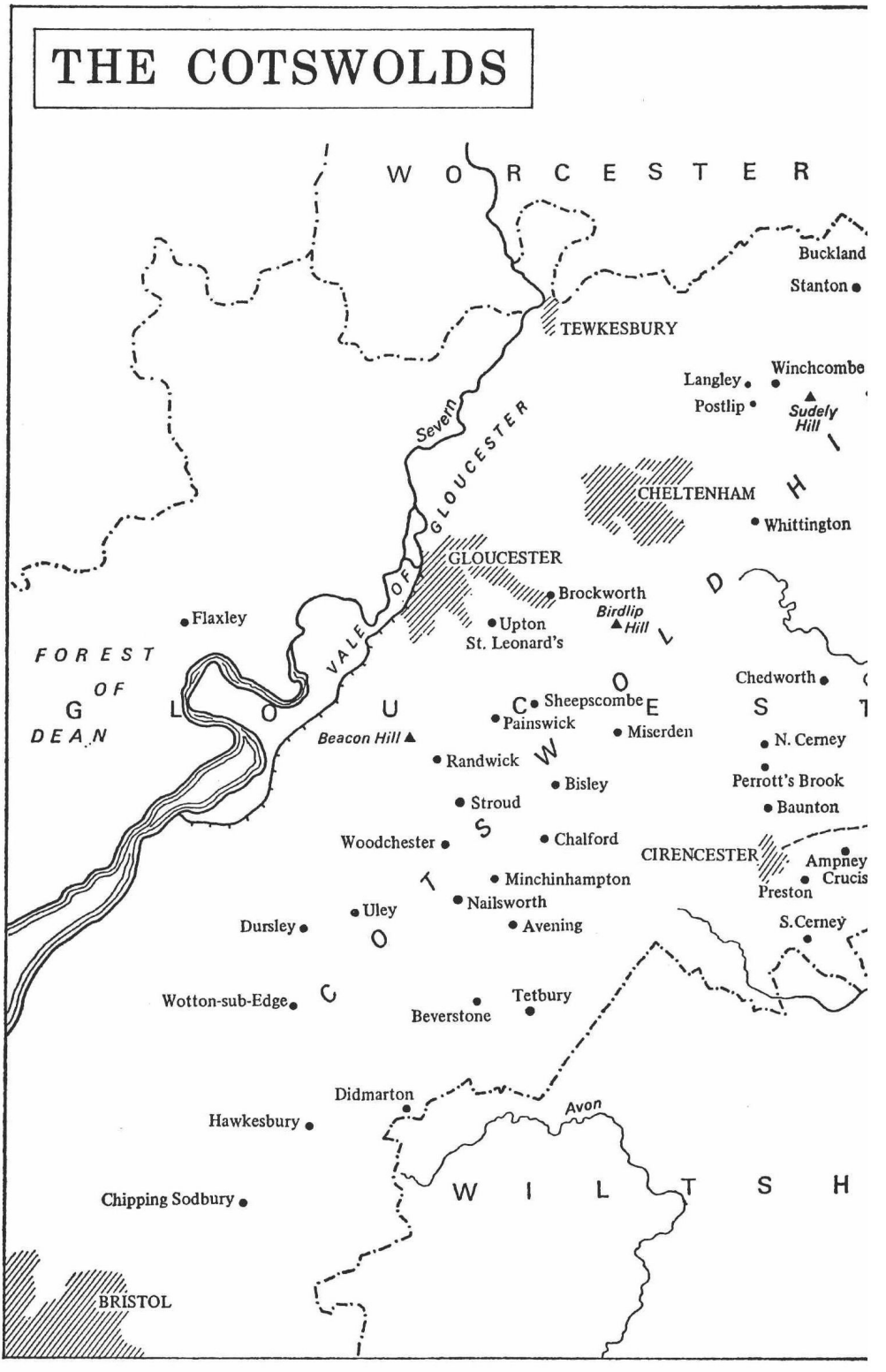
In fact, folklore is an element of our cultural unity, the social structure of which the folklorist himself forms part, and his own role within which he must fully understand if he is to function effectively. A nice story exists of Scott's informant, Mrs Murray Keith, when he disclaimed misuse of her stories: 'What, d'ye think that I dinna ken my ain groats among other folk's kail?' was her comment. But the folklorist must realise that the kail, too, is important. Oddly enough, urban lore, at one time held in some contempt, received early recognition when Scott's friend, Robert Chambers, published his *Traditions of Edinburgh* (1824). Considerable but spasmodic publication of available folklore material has occurred since, and in the 19th century, or even later, much of the collecting was done by local gentry, clergymen, doctors and the like. These categories have either dwindled in importance or, through changing times, possess neither the leisure nor the influence to make them privileged collectors. Yet, as Dr Briggs pointed out in her recent broadcast, their work is not negligible: they are 'people who are known and trusted and who will be told much more real things than somebody coming from outside.'

In this swift changing period, folklore, as a living force, develops at an accelerated pace. Its new aspects must be recorded and studied but, with scarcely over a century of serious collecting behind us, the rungs of cultural life provided by disappearing, or even remoulded, folk traditions risk being overlooked. *The Randwick Wap Modernised* (pages 183–6) differs from the Wap described by Hone, quoting an informant of 1827, not merely because minor details have changed. The whole psychological content has altered, just as the 1827 Wap varied in its essential psychology from those of earlier eras. Hence the description of a custom within any given context, in its various aspects, is as valuable as the factual details.

London University
June 1974.

Venetia Newall

Contents



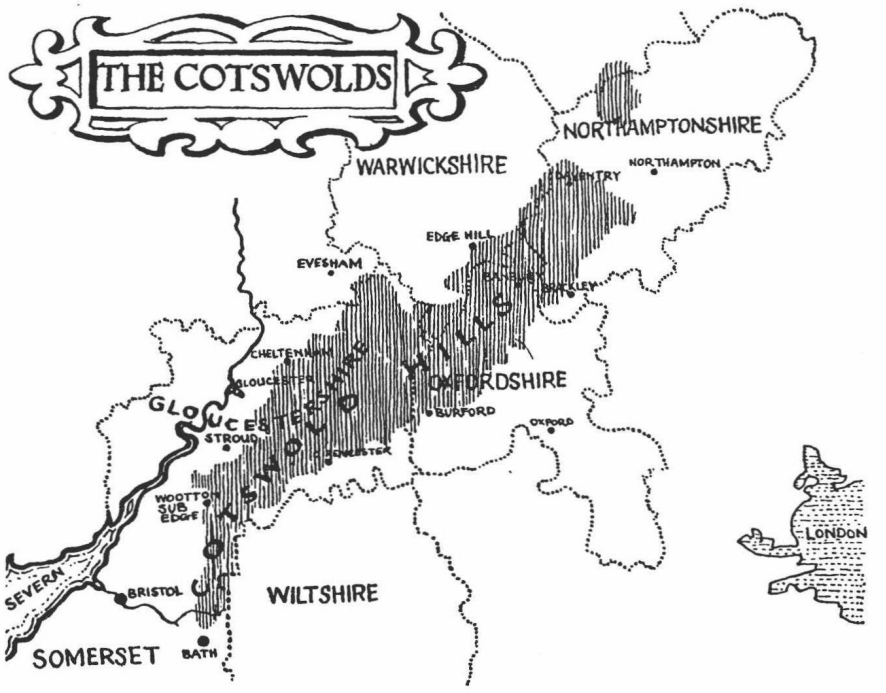

WARWICK
Edgehill
Horley
Hanwell
Alkerton
Wroxton
NORTHAMPTON
Shutford
BANBURY
Weston-sub-Edge
Ebrington
Chipping Campden
N. Newington
Broughton
Broadway
Brackley
Bloxham
King's Sutton
Blockley
Adderbury
Snowshill
Barton-on-the-Heath
Long Compton
Hook Norton
Bourton-on-the-Hill
Rollright Stones
Great Rollright
Deddington
Souldern
Chastleton
Longborough
Great Tew
Duns Tew
Broadwell
Salford
Stow-on-the-Wold
Chipping Norton
OXFORD
Upper Heyford
Lower Swell
Oddington
Enstone
Lower Heyford
Churchill
Icomb
Fulwell
Kiddington
Chadlington
Bledington
Sarsden
Spelsbury
Ditchley
Tackley
Bourton-on-the-Water
Idbury
Bruern
Chilson
Kirtlington
Windrush
Fifield
Milton-under-Wychwood
Ascott-under-Wychwood
Charlbury
Fawler
Stonesfield
Haber-gallows Hill
Shipton-under-Wychwood
Wychwood Forest
Woodstock
Tangley
Finstock
Wilcote
Sherborne
Leafield
Coombe
Bladon
Northleach
Barrington
Taynton
Ramsden
Fulbrook
Fordwells
Hailey
Hanborough
Windrush
Upton
Swinbrook
N. Leigh
Li. Barrington
Crawley
Burford
Asthall
Minster Lovell
Witney
Westwell
Curbridge
S. Leigh
Headington
Coln
Bibury
AKEMAN STREET
Brize Norton
Ducklington
Stanton Harcourt
Eastleach
Filkins
Black Bourton
OXFORD
Quenington
Bampton
Ampney St. Mary
Southrop
Wootton
Poulton
Thames
Clifton Hampden
BERKSHIRE
Uffington
Harwell
BERKSHIRE DOWNS
0
5
10
miles

Acknowledgements

For the reproduction of published material I have to thank the Rev Edward Rainsberry for permission to quote from *Through the Lych Gate* and the Cambridge Morris Men who kindly sent me a copy of their anniversary pamphlet with full permission to quote from it as I desired; and Miss Christina Hole, the editor of *Folklore*, for permission to quote from the publications of the Folklore Society and from the *Annual Record of the Oxfordshire and District Folk-Lore Society.*

The vicar of Painswick spared time on a very busy morning to give me a bunch of leaflets about the Painswick church and the Clipping Service.

I have also to thank many kind oral informants, Mrs Eileen Claridge of Charlbury, Mr Andrews of Swinbrook, Mr F. Abbott of Fulwell, Mrs Holloway of Shorthampton, Mr and Mrs E. Meadows of Snowshill, Mr George Powell of Stonesfield, Mr F. R. Watts of Stonesfield, Mrs J. Poore of Stonesfield, Mr and Mrs Pratley of Wilcote, Miss Ashby and Miss Phillips of Bledington, Mrs Rogers of Painswick, the Rev N. R. Morrison of Randwick Vicarage and the Rev Michael Bland of Buckland Rectory. Mrs Falconer, Mrs Groves and Mrs Haynes, to whom I owe much valuable information, have now died. I much regret the loss of further opportunities of talking to them. Mrs Renée Tickell, however, has kindly given me some further information, which I have included in Chapter 10, gleaned from her mother, Mrs Haynes, and I have to thank her for putting me in touch with Mrs Haynes in the first place.



1 General Survey of the Cotswolds

THE COTSWOLDS ARE AN OUTCROP of that long spine of oolitic limestone that runs from Somerset up to Yorkshire, changing in colour and character from place to place. They cover a part of several counties: Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire, a little way into Warwickshire and an upthrust into Northamptonshire. The exact boundaries are not easy to fix, but they may be said to fade away very near to Burford on the south and to Edgehill on the north-west, to Daventry and Brackley on the north-east, jutting out further west to the escarpment which slopes sharply to the Gloucester Plain at Wootton-sub-Edge and to Worcestershire at Broadway. In Neolithic times roads and pathways avoided the swampy, wooded lowlands and followed the lines of the hills, therefore the Cotswolds show signs of very early habitation, with ancient trackways running across and many menhirs, dolmens and barrows scattered about, with the famous circle of the Rollright Stones,

more primitive in design than Stonehenge and with many legends clustering around it. These uplands were not however bare, like the chalky slopes of the Berkshire Downs, but covered in places by great forests. Wychwood was the eldest of these and the chief of them. It originally covered a great area and gave successive shelter to conquered peoples and tribes. It was so influential in the life and tradition of the Cotswolds that it deserves a chapter to itself. Round the outer borders of the forest are prehistoric earthworks and tombs which bear witness to its early habitation. There are round barrows near Asthall, Brize's Lodge, Chadlington, Ditchley, Enstone, Kiddington, Langley, Leafield, Sarsden, Shipton-under-Wychwood, Spelsbury, Swinbrook and Wootton. And this is only to cite a restricted area. In the same area there are square earthworks and the long Iron-Age fortification of Grim's Ditch, of which five lengths remain between Charlbury and Woodstock. On the western escarpment overhanging the Gloucester Plain and the Bristol Channel there is a long string of Neolithic and Iron-Age forts, mounds and burial chambers. Some of the more impressive are Hetty Pegler's Tump, near Uley, Nan Tow's Tump at Didmarton, the fine, multivallate hillfort at Sodbury and the Bulwarks at Minchinhampton. The traditions that have arisen about these remnants of long-past cultures are naturally of much later date than the artefacts for which they endeavour to account. Even the name 'Grimsditch' is unlikely to be earlier than Saxon times for 'Grim' was a name for Odin and this Iron-Age fortification probably pre-dated the Romans. Nan Tow's Tump at Didmarton is traditionally supposed to be the burial place of a witch, Nan Tow, who was buried standing upright inside it, and the Enstone Hoar Stone is said locally to mark the grave of an imaginary General Hoar, killed in the Civil War. 'Hoar Stone' is however a common name for a standing stone in the Cotswold area. Some archaeologists suppose the word to be 'War Stone', a plausible conjecture, since the initial 'w' and the initial 'h' are both omitted in the Cotswold dialect. It is spoken of as an 'oar stone'. Evidence given by Mr Abbott, a septuagenarian of Fulwell, near Enstone, on 27 April 1973 made no claim for so late a date as the Civil War. He merely called it 'A long time ago; I couldn't say how long.' He recorded an interesting tradition that the body was brought along Dead Man's Ride by a man, a horse and a dog. Dead Man's Ride is an indistinctly marked track which may have originally been part of Grim's Ditch, a short length of which appears

in a line with the track west of Ditchley. A ghost tradition is attached to this and Mr Abbott himself claimed to have seen two men going along Dead Man's Ride and passing straight through the wire-netting fence. His dogs crouched and bristled and would not move till the ghosts had passed. It may be remarked that Mr Abbott, pointing out a large slab of stone lying undressed in the disused quarry, called it 'an oar stone', so that possibly the word only means a large, undressed stone.

The Tingle Stone at the long barrow near Avening is one of the moving stones, like the Somerset Wimble Stone. It is said to run round the field when it hears the church clock strike midnight. This of course can be taken in two ways.

The fullest traditional stories are appropriately told about the most impressive of the Cotswold monuments, the Rollright Stones. These consist of an upshaped circle, of roughly the same diameter as Stonehenge with a tall dolmen on the other side of the ancient trackway about 50 yards to the west, called the King-Stone, and the remains of a long barrow, called the Whispering Knights, about a quarter of a mile to the east. Faint traces of many sepulchral monuments are found in the district, so that the whole area seems to have been a kind of rough Stonehenge. The Rollright Stones were described by Camden in the sixteenth century, by Robert Plot in the seventeenth and by Sheldon and Stukeley in the eighteenth but the fullest account of the traditions surrounding them is given by A. J. Evans in *The Folklore Journal* of 1895. According to the legend the king was at the head of an invading army. He had heard a prophecy that if he could see Long Compton he would be king of all England. Long Compton lay in the Warwickshire valley just below him. He left his army encamped and a group of malcontent knights whispering traitorously at a little distance and strode up the slope to the top of the ride. He had almost reached it when he met a witch, presumably from Long Compton, which was famous for them till almost the present day. She chanted out to him:

> Seven long strides thou shalt take,
> And if Long Compton thou can see,
> King of England thou shalt be.

The king lengthened his stride, shouting exultantly:

Stick, stock, stone!
As King of England I shall be known!

As he took the seventh stride a long barrow of earth rose up in front of him and the witch sang out:

As Long Compton thou canst not see
King of England thou shalt not be.
Rise up stick, and stand still, stone
For King of England thou shalt be none;
Thou and thy men *hoar* stones shall be
And I myself an eldern tree.

All were at once transformed, but the transformation was not complete. One day they say the spell will be broken and the king and his army will set out afresh to conquer England. In the meantime the Whispering Knights go down the hill at midnight to drink from the spring in Little Rollright spinney. Opinions differ as to whether they go down every night or only on certain holy days. At midnight too, it is said that the stones of the circle come to life for a moment and dance round in the air. The king is also said, like the Tingle Stone, to go down to drink the water 'when he hears the church clock strike midnight'. As for the elder witch, she has been variously located, as one tree dies and another grows up. It is also said that at midsummer when she is in flower she will bleed if she is cut. On Midsummer Eve people formed a ring round the King-Stone while one man cut the eldern witch. As she bled the King-Stone moved his head. All elders are supposed to be witches or fairy trees and to bleed if they are cut.

The dancing festivities with cakes and ale described by Stukeley were probably held on Midsummer Eve. Girls used to go one by one up to the Knights to listen to them whispering in hopes of divining their own fate. The fairies were said to dance round the King Stone, coming out of a hole near. An old man, Will Hughes, who was recently dead when Evans wrote, claimed to have seen them and his widow, Betsy Hughes, knew the hole and used as a child to put a stone over it to keep the fairies underground. Chips from the King Stone were considered lucky and travellers liked to carry them but it was thought dangerous to move the stones; anyone who did so was forced by the consequent ill-luck to restore them. A later tradition was that it was impossible to count the stones. A baker who