

‘The Great Scarecrow In Days Long Ago’: Gothic Myths and Family Festivals

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‘I have a proposition to make. Here you are an honest and willing boy. And here am I a scarecrow of enterprise and vision. What would you say if I offered you the position of my personal servant.’ Thus Jack begins his adventures with a turnip-headed scarecrow brought to life by a bolt of lightning. Philip Pullman’s story for young readers, *The Scarecrow and his Servant*, (Pullman 2004) turns the traditional Jack tale on its head. Jack is still resourceful young hero who saves the day from the hopelessly impractical enterprises of his scarecrow companion, but in this situation, the human boy takes the role of helper, while the creature brought to life by a supernatural event is the master. Pullman’s stories always invite readers to explore other layers of meaning, and the reversal in this delightful tale could equally be a metaphor for the changing cultural role of the humble agricultural scarecrow figure.

These collections of old clothes hung on sticks were once a familiar sight in the countryside. Various called *tattie doolies*, *bogles* or *scarecrows*, these effigies were placed in fields of growing crops to discourage unwanted wildlife. As the ever-growing cities demanded more food and greater agricultural production, these figures were replaced with more efficient devices, like automatic noisemakers. Scarecrows, however, have made a comeback. They are no longer just a pragmatic agricultural device, they have been absorbed into the symbolism of gothic and horror literature, and more recently have become symbols of our changing attitudes to Nature and to community as embodied in the countryside and its way of life.

What is it about the scarecrow that gives it this potential? Does it depend on its position in folk culture, an ancient meaning or a ritual usage? Or is it that we have re-interpreted the figure in terms of later cultural models? The answer is probably a combination of factors. Whatever the origin, the changing function of the scarecrow is expressed in new ways creating modern craft festivals and, more problematic, an increasing range of anthropomorphic and gothic figures in literature and popular culture.

The most widely known English term for these figures is *scarecrow*, but other, more regional terms, such as *bogle*, *doolie* and occasionally *mommet* or *mawhini* are used to describe such figures. Most of the citations in the *Oxford English Dictionary* date to the sixteenth century and later, but there can be little doubt that scarecrows were in use much earlier. The terminology reflects both the function and nature of these effigies. The term ‘*scarecrow*’ reflects its role exactly and could be applied to a person who was employed to perform the task of keeping birds and other predators out of the fields as well as the figure. The same is true for *doolie*, if one takes this to be a variant of *dole* (marker). The rare Berkshire dialect word, *hodmedod*, refers to a silly person, while *mommet* reflects the construction, something made of rags like a mop. *Bogle* is the only term with even a suspicion of the supernatural about it. The exact origin of the word is unclear, both *bwg* (Welsh for ghost) and German *boggel mann* are possible suggestions. *Bwgan* is a common word for scarecrow in Welsh (Davies 2000) as is *bodach* in Scots Gaelic (MacFhionghuin 1951), but this does

really explain why a word with apparent supernatural overtones should be applied to the field figure. By contrast, the terms are often used to refer to something that is not really frightening, and in one of Shakespeare's play, *Henry VI*, a character speaks dismissively of "the Scar-crow that affrights our children" (Act I, sc. iv).

Scarecrows belong to a class of ephemeral figures such as effigies, corn dollies and various seasonal figures, and it is easy, perhaps too easy, to transfer traditions from one to the other. (Haining 1988; Neal and Parker 1969; Bechtold 2001) The Jack-a-Lent was a small stuffed effigy pelted as part of a Lenten game. In Shakespeare's "*Merry Wives of Windsor*", Falstaff calls the young servant Robin by that name and later when he is disguised as Herne the Hunter says that he too feels like a figure being pelted (Act III, iii; Act V, v). In some Slavic countries, a colourful straw figure, called a *Kostroma*, is burned at the end of the carnival season, and there are comparable customs elsewhere. It has become a standard assumption of romantic folklore that such figures are substitutes for ancient human sacrifices, but there is no solid evidence for this. Such romanticised notions attribute 'ancient' origins to all kinds of modern customs, playing on our fondness for linking past and present in imaginatively satisfying ways. There is undoubted crossover with other peripheral figures. The similarities however underlie attitudes to a wide variety of 'marginal' activities and need not be explained by anything ancient, especially when there is such a wide gap between existing information and a supposedly early ritual complex. Jack-O-Lantern, the stingy trickster of Irish and British folk legends is one of many figures doomed to wander between both heaven and hell. Initially he carries a light in a turnip or pumpkin, but eventually his head becomes the lantern. Philip Pullman's scarecrow character has a pumpkin head and Frank L. Baum created a character called Jack Pumpkinhead who appeared in several *Land of Oz* books. He was originally created with wooden sticks for a body, a carved pumpkin head and cast off, but very natty, clothes to scare a witch. However the witch brought him to life and, riding his trusty sawhorse, he accompanies a young boy on a series of adventures. Like the better-known Scarecrow of Oz, his character is a mixture of naivety and commonsense. The naughty trickster-like facets of these characters are both part of their appeal and one of the factors that make scarecrows so easy to fuse with seasonal and traditional figures like Jack-O-Lantern. Not surprisingly Kermit takes the role of the Scarecrow in the Muppet *Land of Oz*, while Jack Skellington, sepulchral, skeletal and scarecrow-like all at once is a modern example of the well-intentioned, but hopelessly naïve trickster who gets in over his head.

Permanent effigies of the dead were carved on tombs or monuments, but life-size funeral effigies made of wax or with wax faces and stuffed bodies were sometimes displayed at the funerals of important persons. Mourners could view these effigies and leave tokens, poems, notes or the like, a custom paralleled by the modern condolence book. A number of these, including the effigies of several monarchs still exist among the splendid collection held at Westminster Abbey (Harvey and Mortimer). As a form of political and social symbol an effigy could carry a powerful meaning, especially when it was the target of public ridicule or burning. The November 'guy' created in memory of Guy Fawkes is the best-known example today, but burning effigies of the Roman Pope was popular in parts of Britain and Ireland in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution (Cressy 1989). The celebration of Guy Fawkes Day in Lewes in Sussex still culminates with effigies being paraded through the streets, and the choice of subjects reflects a continuing use of such effigies as a form of political and social

comment. Mrs Thatcher, for example, got the bonfire treatment in the 1980s. Originally the observance of Guy Fawkes Day had a distinctly Protestant overtone, but burning effigies was, and still is, associated with fiesta and carnival celebrations in Catholic countries where figures made of *papier maché* or straw are blown up by fireworks or burnt. Political protest or social comment is sometimes a factor here, but the religious context of these festivals has changed, giving way, by and large, to a secular celebration of local or national identity. The Jack a Lent, and related customs, may have had a penitential as well as a play element, but there is no evidence that they had a pagan origin, even less that a stuffed figure was a substitute for a human sacrifice. The burning of effigies in religious rituals can signal an intention to banish something, and the symbolic burning of the thing the effigy represents may be an element in both political demonstrations and annual community celebrations. These activities really need no further explanation, certainly not in terms of ancient sacrifice. There is always a danger in taking metaphors too seriously and too far. If post-modernism tells us anything, it is that we can create complex thought worlds without having to search for an ancient reality.

However, the idea that these figures are survivals of ancient pre-Christian fertility customs remains a popular explanation of their origins. This explanation was a mainstay of early folklore studies, still remains central to certain popular approaches and is guaranteed to irritate anthropologists and professional folklorists alike (Judge 1991). James Fraser and his speculations about a dying god linked to a universal agricultural myth have a lot to answer for in creating an emotionally appealing, but far too glib a model to apply to these customs (Segal 1998). There is insufficient evidence to suggest that scarecrows were anything other than a useful measure to control animal pests in an agricultural setting, although many of them no doubt ended up on end-of season bonfires. Other ephemeral figures have other shades of meaning. Corn dollies were lucky talismans for future crops, but here again the idea of sacrifice is a result of early scholars interpreting the beliefs surrounding them as quaint survivals of ancient practices and assigning meanings. Despite the lack of proof that these ephemeral figures were once connected to a pan-European agricultural myth, the meaning of the figure does change as the agricultural purpose changes or becomes obsolete. Even if it is not a survival of primitive ritual, it can still be a symbol for a world long past or, more romantically, for a bucolic utopia that never existed. Caesar's famous Wicker Man was, for him, proof of Celtic barbarity. For us it is a cult film and increasingly a symbol of local connectedness. Wicker figures have been used as landscape sculpture or burned as part of local celebrations (*Country Life* 1995). Butzer Iron Age farm has burned a wicker figure as part of its highly imaginative Beltain festival, and the Burning Man art festival in Nevada encourages radical artistic self-expression that ends with the burning of a modern wicker figure. Caesar's engine of sacrifice has become a means for constructing and expressing a range of modern identities.

The humble scarecrow however is fast catching up to its more glamorous cousins. Scarecrow festivals are a comparatively recent phenomenon, but they are multiplying fast. They are frequently linked to established holidays, such as Halloween or autumn harvest celebrations, in North America, and to summer bank holidays, themselves replacements for harvest festivals, in Britain, Europe and Australia. Often they take place in smaller towns and villages located in areas which have been directly affected by changing agricultural production. There are a number of such festivals in, for

example, Illinois and Michigan, (celebrated in October) Kettlewell, Yorkshire (July/August), the Loire Valley (early August), Milton, New South Wales Kurragong, Australia (August), Edmonton, Canada (Halloween). These are community-oriented events with local merchants and local services, like the Fire and Police Departments, acting as sponsors and organisers. Many have Internet sites to encourage outside visitors and they provide parking amenities and sometimes charge admission fees. However the emphasis is on family participation, family values and a community way of life. My own collection of scarecrow ephemera has a number of advertising flyers for festivals either too small to have an Internet site, or unwilling to attract too much tourist attendance. The festival held at St Charles, Illinois, which recently marked its twentieth year with a souvenir programme, makes the point that this (is) a “non alcohol family fun festival” which implies a contrast with other celebrations as, for example, Autumn beer festivals. The village of Thornton Hough has an annual festival whose main event is to collect as large a number of craft-made scarecrows as possible and whose profits go into the upkeep of the village. In Japan the *kakashi matsuri* (scarecrow festival) has a quite different heritage. It is an autumn festival which is part of the dense tapestry of Shinto celebration, and *Kakashi matsuri* are celebrated all over Japan. The one in Kaminiyama is described by the Tokyo tourist information website as a ‘homey festival in the middle of the busy city of Tokyo’, and, besides the traditional scarecrows, it also promises a karaoke contest and crafts for sale. Here too there are echoes of a lost agricultural world viewed from the perspective of a modern metropolis.

Celebrating the scarecrow in contemporary life now takes in a new range of activities. Contemporary culture has rediscovered the idea of craft, and the notion encompasses far more than just the skills to make an object and the scarecrow has been transformed into an object of folk art (Miller 2005). The Internet advertises courses in scarecrow making, and festivals feature contests and costume parades to find the ‘best’ scarecrow based on aesthetic rather than functional criteria. In these new contexts the scarecrow is appreciated honestly and without cynicism for the nostalgia it evokes about a past which is gone, but can still be acted out and, of course, merchandised. Arts and crafts exhibitions, demonstrations, competitions and sales are an integral part of scarecrow festivals. Certainly, they generate income. But, in addition, hand-made goods have become an indicator of the resistance to globalisation and mass production and a link with past community activity. Unlike crafts such as pottery or basket weaving, scarecrow making seems to have been an occasional activity with no specific set of skills. Interestingly although these festivals stress hand-made crafts in a shared community environment, many of them also market those ubiquitous talismans of modern popular culture, posters and T-shirts which fix an image and allow it to be carried off. Despite this, the scarecrow in today’s world is able to link groups symbolically to the land, to food production and a to a lost world of close-knit communities practicing rituals both Christian and pagan. In this context the fact that such things never existed is subsumed into an imaginative network of created meaning. The use of the scarecrow as a symbol of a utopian agricultural past occurs regularly in an obvious commercial context. A themed shopping mall with the evocative name, Peddler’s Village in Pennsylvania, for example organised a scarecrow festival. There are some lovely examples of artistic scarecrows on the Internet at a range of prices, but the advertising descriptions always express non-commercial values. Perhaps one of the most evocative commercial uses in recent years is a semiotic dream of an advertisement created in 2005 by the cereal company,

Wheatabix. It features a Scarecrow who 'has lost his scare' and is adrift in a dark, rather barren landscape, but he is restored by the very cereal products he should be defending.

In the United States, and this is undoubtedly true of other places, the scarecrow has found a place in the 'folk culture' of the suburbs. An October contest organised by a garden centre offered gift certificates as prizes for the best scarecrow. Apart from the very modern use of gardening as a way of maintaining contact with the earth in a suburban world, the categories for the scarecrow entries are interesting. Submissions were sought in three areas, 'scary, funny or charming.' Suburban houses often place decorative figures of various kinds on lawns or porches. Many of these resemble their agricultural forbears, although for the most part these urban scarecrows are plastic, purchased from a shop or catalogue, and reusable. They inhabit the spaces around residential dwellings as if inviting friends to 'cross' the space and enter. In a very real sense they embody the safe and neighbourly aspirations of suburban space, in contrast to the isolation of urban dwellers, alone and subject to random crime. In all fairness, similar, although usually smaller, versions adorn urban windows balconies and doorways.

The ephemeral nature of the scarecrow and his liminal position in social and temporal spaces has enormous semiotic potential. The figure has a special place in the seasonal iconography of the United States. The scarecrow links the celebration of Halloween at the end of October with Thanksgiving at the end of November, at which point it gives way to another peripheral figure, the snowman (Andy Coghlan, *New Scientist* 1999). Halloween is becoming increasingly important in commercial terms and Thanksgiving has been a focus for American family values, since the holiday was made official after the Civil War. Ephemera for these holidays have been produced commercially since the turn of the twentieth century. While these commercial ephemera characteristically depict the scarecrow as a cute boyish, and more recently girlish, figure, the noble but isolated figure in Walter de la Mare's poem captures the liminal attraction of the field scarecrow. In the poem, those who actually work the land are silent. The dense poetic diction that characterises de la Mare's poetry is put into the mouth of a scarecrow who watches the passing seasons. During winter nights, the frozen creature "flames with glittering rime", but in spring, the "void eyes...scan the sky for crows," and he gazes at "sun-begotten grain" which his "unflinching watch hath sealed for harvest once again." The stoic isolation of this created figure implies a hint of ambiguity in its relation to the 'other' of the poem whom the scarecrow refers to as "my strange master, Man" (de la Mare 1969).

The concept of liminality is a productive way to understand the development of the scarecrow as a cultural image. It obviates the necessity for dubious survival arguments that need to span centuries without data and it brings to the foreground less controversial characteristics such as the scarecrow's position on the margins of cultural space. This is a disposable figure made of cast-offs, set up on cultivated land to prevent the incursion of wild nature. Its similarities with other liminal figures provide a rich source of symbolic reference, even if there are not credible historical links between them. As inhabitants of the periphery, the similarities between scarecrows and other simulacra, like the *golem* made from clay, that are subsequently brought to life become striking and even potentially disturbing. A life force which gives the power of movement to simulacra without the controls exercised by reason or

real emotion is particularly frightening and such creatures have been prominent in the gothic literature from the eighteenth century to the present. Frankenstein's original monster was made of random body parts; E.T.A. Hoffmann's diabolical Dr Coppelius animated his automata with the stolen eyes, reflections and shadows of his victims. The same fear of something which looks but is not human underlies Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). The 'skin-jobs' are, in effect, high-tech scarecrows, and they owe a great deal to Hoffmann's Coppelius. They escape their 'off world' periphery and run amok in a dystopic urban setting. Another variation of this motif occurs in one of the stories in *I Robot*. The mechanical robot nanny feels real emotion for its human charge and only the child realizes this. In children's literature, the scarecrow is usually a helper, presenting an opportunity for the main character to develop in some way. This basic motif can be varied, as in Pullman's tale, and as the scarecrow's meaning becomes more closely linked to our changing perception of nature themes such as ecology (Newman 2003) are being introduced.

This conceit of an inert manikin coming to life to help a child is adopted in the large, and growing, number of children's stories which incorporate scarecrows. The most famous is surely Frank Baum's scarecrow from the *Land of Oz* stories, personalized forever one suspects by Ray Bolger's boneless dancing and warm voice. Modern sequels and reinterpretations demonstrate the potential of these characters. Eric Shanower's series of graphic novels written in the 1980s recount further adventures. The scarecrow, actually a mixture of two Baum characters, in *The Forgotten Forest of Oz*, rescues Dorothy. Another scarecrow character, Odemedod, a name derived from a Berkshire dialect word, *hodmedod*, is a recurring character in the Rupert the Bear tales (Redfern 1993). Barbara Euphen Todd's *Daily Express* cartoon became a series of books and a television series. It contained a fully developed scarecrow culture which included Worzel Gummidge, his wife Earthy Mangold, and two lady friends, the fairground doll and the ship's figurehead (Todd 1936). This highlights the question of scarecrow gender. Traditional scarecrows were seemingly made to resemble males, although one of the less common terms, *mommet*, also meant a maidservant. Word meanings are not a reliable reflection of origins, but another ephemeral figure, the corn dolly, was also nominally female. However, this gender bias has gone completely in modern craft scarecrows which depict both male and female as well as adult and child scarecrows.

Many scarecrow stories have been illustrated, but depictions of scarecrows in art, prior to the modern explosion of interest in the figure, are surprisingly difficult to find. Van Gogh's numerous atmospheric pictures of fields, many of them near San Remy where he spent the last years of his life, show fields of corn and grain with crows. Some of them depict solitary figures sowing or harvesting, but none seem to include the *épouvantail*. An arts and craft style lithograph from the collection at the Wellcome Library of the History of Medicine, depicts a group of Ukranian women in folk costume teasing a pock-marked and partially blinded boy. This health poster was part of a pro-vaccination campaign, and the little boy says, tearfully, that like a scarecrow everyone will laugh at him, but the scarecrow figure is not there. Music too has its scarecrows. There are a number of choral pieces for young people that use the scarecrow as a theme. Benny Goodman wrote the "Scarecrow foxtrot" in 1941 and Pink Floyd wrote a rock song in the late 1960s.

A much darker image of the scarecrow appears in Walter de la Mare's 1945 story in which a scarecrow is brought to life by a mandrake accidentally incorporated into its stuffing. The most elaborate use of scarecrow imagery occurs in the context of what might loosely be considered the 'gothic' and 'horror' genres which exploit the ambiguities of 'scarecrows' characters ranging from heroic to nightmarish. "The scarecrow" is used as a title in tales of the occult and mystery novels of varying originality. Hugh Walpole, whose tales are psychological rather than supernatural, uses the motif of a lonely child whose 'vision' of a shining scarecrow follows him throughout life. (Walpole 1934). The theory relating the scarecrow to a survival of an ancient sacrificial ritual underpins many horror novels and films. As a literary motif this can be very effective, more so than as a serious theory of cultural origin. In Tom Tryon's *Harvest Home*, a husband and wife move to the country to escape from the impersonal city and find themselves in the midst of a community which sacrifices one of its members annually to maintain the vegetation cycle. One character tries to escape, but ends up pinned to a scarecrow frame. A similar situation forms the basis for Stephen King's 'Children of the Corn', a short story which became the basis for a whole series of horror films. A young couple stumble into an isolated town where the children sacrifice victims as crucified scarecrows to 'that which runs between the rows'. The Japanese horror film, *Kakashi*, (Japanese for scarecrow), which owes much to manga comic tradition and an increasingly successful Japanese horror film industry, also follows the misfortunes of an outsider who stumbles into an isolated and bizarre community. The inhabitants replace the more traditional custom of burning hair to keep wild animals and evil spirits away with *kakashi* in human form. These human *kakashi* attract rather than repel spirits, especially during the annual festival where the effigies are burned. The television series, *Supernatural*, also used the 'scarecrow and sacrifice motif' is one of its episodes. In one episode the two brothers are sent to a village where people are sacrificed to a demonic presence that manifests itself as a murderous scarecrow. All of this has little to do with folklore associated with scarecrows and a great deal to do with the, essentially romantic and literary, traditions of the gothic imagination. These are however, powerful traditions in their own right.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the heyday of a certain kind of smuggler/pirate/adventurer novel. These novels give the impression that the southern coast of England and Cornwall from Romney March to Jamaica Inn was populated by handsome bad boy rebels devoted to rescuing people from the Spanish Inquisition, the Terror and the Excisemen while performing nifty fencing moves and fluttering the hearts of the local ladies. These heroes harbour some dark secret in their past which forces them into a daytime life of apparent respectability and a nighttime existence of disguise on the margins of society. Of course, and this is true for both male and female authors, the disguised outsider is looking not just for justice, but for redemption as well and happy the lucky woman whom he chooses. Beginning with *Dr Syn a Tale of Romney Marsh* in 1915, Russell Thorndike wrote a series of books in the best tradition of these novels about Dr Christopher Syn, the scholarly vicar of Dymchurch by the Wall on Romney March whose alter egos were Clegg the pirate and the Scarecrow, smuggler extraordinaire. Seven books, three films, later sequels, several thriving fanzine sites, a bi-annual celebration in the real Kent village of Dymchurch and an operatic setting (Cruft and Platt 1983) are testament enough to Thorndike's ability to create just the right mix of history, adventure and romance, held together with appropriately gothic trappings. The figure, who serendipitously

'borrows' a scarecrow's clothes as a disguise on his first outing is rapidly surrounded by an evocative, if not very subtle, paraphernalia of supernatural reference: Gahenna his horse, Curlew, Hellspite and the 'Night Rider' smugglers themselves. Three actors have played the title role. George Arliss in the late 1930s was the most sinister in a film with little of the background atmosphere apart from a very short scene involving a scarecrow and a brief shot of men in cloaks riding horses. Peter Cushing conformed most closely to the physical description of Thorndike's vicar, but changing the name to Dr Blyss did not help the atmosphere, and only after the film got the full Disney treatment complete with 'folk' ballad theme, plenty of atmosphere and unchecked brooding on the part of Patrick McGoohan was the romantic gothic potential of the stories fully realized.

Nothing quite like Dr Syn has come along since, although the Australian thriller writer, Matthew Reilly, has created in the character of Captain Shane Shofield, (call sign The Scarecrow) a preternaturally self-reliant outsider being mysteriously hunted by unknown forces. Quite different qualities of the scarecrow come through in Buster Keaton's short silent film written by and starring him. Keaton's acting had some of the qualities of *commedia del arte*, and his film is reminiscent of the type of scarecrow in Walter de la Mare's earlier poem. However more recent realizations of the gothic scarecrow stress its darker side and the nightmarish quality of something inanimate suddenly coming to life. Early Batman comics feature the Scarecrow as a villain, and he has re-appeared intermittently over the years, most recently in *Batman Begins*. This film marks a return to the dark gothicism of the first Batman film. The psychotic academic turned criminal mastermind in charge of an asylum provides plenty of opportunity for the main character to wrestle with his own demons while rescuing innocents in peril.

Why indeed should the scarecrow stay quietly in his fields when we are so ready to welcome him into our gardens, watch him flicker across our screens and join in our celebrations?

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