



Trows are fascinating creatures found only in the folklore of the Orkney and Shetland islands. Yet, describing them accurately is difficult because sources are not always clear.

Folklorists have long insisted that the word “trow” is a corruption of “troll,” and that Orkney’s Trows descend from their Viking ancestors’ stories of Trolls. Sigurd Towrie, author of the comprehensive website covering all things Orkney (Orkneyjar.com), disagrees with this assessment. He believes there may be a connection with a different creature from Norse mythology, the Draugr. This connection stems from both creatures’ affiliation with burial mounds. The Draugr were undead tomb guardians who harassed any trespassers, whether human or animal, who dared to come too close to his mound. In Orkney folklore, Trows also had an association with mounds. Further, “trow” is pronounced to rhyme with “cow.” Towrie believes “trow” evolved from a now extinct Orcadian word “drow” (also rhymes with cow) which relates to Draugr.

It gets more confusing still!

Apparently, Orkney mythology merges Fairies and Trows, making it unclear if they are the same species, or if they were once separate creatures that merged over hundreds of years of storytelling. Sometimes the words are used interchangeably.

In his book of Orkney folk tales, storyteller Tom Muir admits that even he can’t suss it out. He says “In Orkney the word [Trow] has been mixed up with the fairy, so it is hard to say if we are dealing with one or more type of creature. In the text of this book I have used the name given by the person who told the story” (Muir, xi).

This highlights the huge discrepancy between contemporary and previous conceptions of Fairies. Most people today would not identify a “trollish” creature as either a fairy or a hideous undead grave-haunting monster! Our cultural conception of fairies does not overlap with, say... zombies for example. Supernatural creatures of yester yore have often survived in the contemporary consciousness as either benevolent or malicious with no grey area in between. This is likely due to Christianization.

Pre-Christian European supernatural beings ranged on a continuum with varying levels of benevolence or malevolence toward humans. Often the level of kindness or helpfulness of the spirit to the human depended on the human's actions toward the spirit world and/or nature. A human who transgressed upon nature in a way that was deemed disrespectful would incur the ire of the protective spirits of that place. However, with Christianization came the new concept of polarity. Rather than a continuum, wherein both humans and spirits could range from various levels of good and bad, the new worldview was black and white; angels being good, demons being bad. If one reads enough post-conversion folklore, we find that Christian imagery is often laid down directly over pre-Christian myth. Therefore, we find that trolls, giants, elves, and all manner of supernatural creatures are equated with demons and frightened off by scripture, the sign of the cross, the presence of a Bible, etc. The problem is that the original context of these legends becomes blurred.

So, where a contemporary person sees fairies as angelic figures and trolls as demonic, our ancestors had a completely different conception. In no other place is this highlighted as much, that I have yet seen, as in the Orcadian Trow.

Physical descriptions of Trows vary. They could range in size from very small to quite large. On average, Trows were diminutive in stature, standing perhaps four foot tall. Like Trolls, they were known to be very ugly and covered in hair.

Trows wreaked all manner of havoc on humans, and could be responsible for taking the lives of children, women in childbirth, and entire herds of livestock. The term "elf-shot" was used by Anglo-Saxons on the British mainland to refer to an illness that could not be explained. It was assumed that whoever fell ill had been shot with an Elf's arrow. Strangely enough, the same term was used in Orkney. However, in Orkney the Trows were the culprits shooting the Elf arrows.



Trows were also blamed for the folkloric phenomena known as "changelings." The Orkney versions are similar to changeling stories found all around Europe, the only difference being that the Trows were the culprits instead of Fairies or Elves. A Changeling was often a sickly infant or child. Conditions that were not medically understood such as Down's Syndrome or mental retardation could be attributed to the child being a Changeling.

The idea was that the real child, the healthy one, had been kidnapped by Trows who left their own sickly child in its place. Sometimes adults could be Changelings as well.





A woman who died in childbirth might have been taken by the Trows and replaced with an enchanted block of wood that resembled her. Elderly folks afflicted with dementia were also said to be the victims of Trowie magic. An old man or woman with Alzheimer's disease was said to be taken into the mound with the Trows.

Yet, they also engaged in activities shared by more fanciful creatures known to the folklore of

nearby cultures. Like Irish Leprechauns, Trows were known to have a passion for music. Stories are told of Orcadian musicians being whisked away to play their music for the Trows in the mounds. Often these musicians returned with strange new melodies that were enchanting and otherworldly to the human ear.

But, sometimes, these musicians could be caught up in the dancing and revelry of the Trowie world.



What seemed like a few hours in Trow-land translated into many years when they returned to the human world. Sometimes the unfortunate musician might return to find nearly all his friends and family had grown old or passed away, while he had not aged one day.

In some cases, Trows could be helpful. There are stories of Trows kept as farmhands. However, the farmer would have to keep a close watch that his Trowie helpers got up to no mischief! In stories depicting this scenario, the farmer would round up the Trows and lock them up at the end of the day lest they cause trouble in the night.

Ernest W. Marwick was a leading scholar and author on Orkney folklore. He wrote, quite literally, the definitive works on Orkney. His *An Orkney Folklore* was released in two volumes and encompasses only a selection of his full writings on Orkney. Marwick asserts that Trows do, indeed, stem from Norse Trolls. Marwick believes that the immensely sized Trolls and Giants of Norse lore were scaled down to fit within the confines of the island community. In other words, the Troll evolved into the Trow due to his new environment. What is interesting is that the Trow then split into two distinct subspecies: the land Trows and the water Trows.

According to legend, both species were originally one. At some point in time there was a civil war between two factions. The losing side was banished from land and forced to make a new life in the sea, resulting in a new race of Sea Trows.

After reading Marwick's writings in addition to Sigurd Towrie's, my own conclusion is that they both must be correct. There are certainly elements of the Troll and the Draugr in the Orkney Trow; as well as the Fairy, the Elf, the Leprechaun, the Giant, and probably other fairytale creatures. Perhaps Marwick's theory that the island environment was too limited in space for large scale creatures of legend to survive in the imagination of the islanders is correct. With less land mass, perhaps the local folklore could not make sense of the plethora of fairytale creatures that existed in the wide spaces and diverse topography of larger environments. So, maybe the many legendary creatures of their ancestors were merged into the singular creature the Orcadians call the Trow.

Whatever the case, Orkney folklore abounds in Trowie tales. In time, I hope to share more with you. So, stayed tuned for more adventures through Orcadian folklore in future issues of Celtic Guide.

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Carolyn Emerick holds a bachelor's degree in Literature and is currently pursuing a master's degree in Library and Information Science with a concentration in Archives. Follow more of her writing at: <http://carolynemerick.hubpages.com/>