

Cornwall's 19th-century folklorists

Robert Hunt (1807–87)

As a child, Hunt noted down 'strange stories' he heard in the Bodmin area where some of his family lived but later lost his notebook. 1829-30 travelled throughout Cornwall collecting myths, legends and superstitions from the old people just as they were beginning to be ashamed of telling them; many of the 'wild tales of Cornwall, which had either terrified or amused me when a child', did not outlive their tellers.

Recorded the stories told by the last two droll-tellers in the West Country; 'men who travelled from one hearthside to another telling traditional tales laced with liberal imaginings', substituting local names and characters in different places.

Collected more material in 1863 prior to publication of *Popular Romances of the West of England* in 1865 (two volumes); re-printed in 1871 and 1881 as *The Drolls, Traditions, and Superstitions of Old Cornwall*. He included material collected by William Bottrell (see below). Hunt was aware of other folklorists' work; he was analytical, occasionally humorous, and poetical – the 'romanticism' of the legends appealed to him.

Involved in the early development of photography, experimenting with processes and papers. Lived in Falmouth from 1840–45 while Secretary to the Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society. Published the first manual on photography in English in 1844. Knew W.H. Fox Talbot, who had announced his discovery of photography in 1839: 'a little bit of magic realised'. Talbot published a book on legends in 1830.

William Bottrell (1816–81)

Little is known about him: born in Raftra, St Levan, near Land's End. Travelled and lived abroad, before returning to West Cornwall; contributed to magazines under the pseudonym of the 'Old Celt'. Collected Breton folktales. Had allowed Hunt to include his material in *Popular Romances*, before finally publishing his own volumes as *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall* in 1870 and 1873; the third volume was published in 1880, after he had suffered a stroke.

Shows an affinity with the Cornish peasantry, expressing concern for the way the people and the landscape in Cornwall were changing: new roads were replacing the old, and vast areas of the county were being covered with mining operations, quarrying and, literally, mountains of waste. Cornish names, which 'meant something' were being replaced by English ones.

If the stories collected by the Brothers Grimm and published in the early 19th century were representative of German nationalism, the stories collected by Bottrell represented, if not a stated nationalism, a Cornishness and a way of life under threat from education, religion and tourism.

Bottrell quoted his sources – whether a mining captain or a droll-teller – at length, often in detailed narratives, with speech and drama. His approach was that of a natural storyteller, fully aware that the stories, many of them set fifty or a hundred years before, were products of several generations of imaginations, inspired by their natural and familiar surroundings.

Margaret Ann Courtney (1834–1920)

Born and died in Penzance; she was from a literary family, and never married; little more is known of her life.

Articles published for the Folklore Society in 1886 and 1887; revised and re-edited as *Cornish Feasts and Folklore* in 1890, a miscellany culled from published sources, such as Hunt, Bottrell, Hawker, Quiller Couch, and others, and from items in local newspapers and *Notes and Queries*, many of them contributed by antiquarian clergymen. Also includes information given to her by local people, and her own childhood memories.