

Bats, witchcraft and omens

Folklore collections of the 19th and 20th centuries show remarkably few instances of recent additions to the lore regarding bats. Superstitions connected with these mammals extend a long way into human culture in the distant past.

Bats are known to have evolved and diversified over the past 50 million years, and today present a range of endangered species. They make a fascinating study, whose adherents seem now to be on the increase. Their mysterious lifestyle, since they do not go out of their way to attract notice, is part of their charm.

In former times these creatures were closely associated with witches, vampires and demons. However, in Europe, where true vampire bats are not encountered, argue Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud in their 'Dictionary of English folklore' (2000), much of the notion of the bloodsucking nature of bats has been derived from modern horror films rather than folklore traditions. In particular, Bram Stoker's book 'Dracula' (1897) played a major role in encouraging the view that bats are sinister creatures. And there has been a widely held belief that bats make a habit of entangling themselves in the hair of women and children, a claim that was disproved by a research investigation in 1959 which demonstrated that a bat deliberately placed in a woman's hair could easily disentangle itself. William Blake commented in 1803: "The bat that flits at close of eve / Has left the brain that won't believe."

In Scotland a century ago the bat, there called "the bawkie-bird", was distinctly associated with witchcraft. If you observed one flying high and then descending quickly, it was the hour when witches come into their own, and woe to you if you had no counter spell to protect you.

Richard Jefferies in 1879 noted that if on a warm summer evening a bat entered your sitting room through an open window, it was an evil omen, made worse if the creature collided with a candle. He wrote further that to encounter a bat in the hours of broad daylight was a bad sign, though he did not specify what the evil might be. Meanwhile, in Shropshire it was highly unlucky to bring a bat into the house, or to kill one.

Shakespeare seems to have had a fondness for bats. We read in 'The Tempest' of flight on a bat's back. On the other hand, we are told in 'Macbeth' that "wool of bat" was one of the ingredients of the witches' brew. And in the same play we learn of the evil portent of the creature. "Ere the bat hath flown / His cloistered flight, ere to black Hecate's summons / The shard-borne beetle with his drowsy hum / Hath rung night's yawning peal, there shall be done / A deed of dreadful note." By contrast, I find Alfred Tennyson's: "Come into the garden, Maud / For the black bat,



night, has flown" remarkably soothing. And the tail-end of a summer's evening, with the large noctules sweeping majestically over the surface of a lake, can be similarly relaxing, as opposed to the erratic flutter of a group of tiny pipistrelles as they dart in all directions.

Under fire

Anyone who attempts to offer fellow professionals random comments on a wide range of topics closely or distantly related to their main interest must expect criticism. As Matthew Arnold remarked in 1865, "I am bound by my own definition of criticism: a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world." (You will note again that temptation of mine to quote others!) A correspondent has dubbed me "narrow, self-satisfied, and rather patrician". Possibly, though I profess a holistic rather than a narrow outlook, and the title "patrician", signifying nobility, goes against my own belief that I am a peasant at heart.

I have to confess, regarding my literary style, that in my grammar school days my English teacher wrote "Pompous and Johnsonian" on one of my essays. This was more than offset later in college by an article in the college magazine, characterising current students by quotations. Against my name appeared this tribute: "Un philosophe d'autrefois, qui se promène un peu, rêve un peu, et fait des oeuvres assez charmantes." The problem for me here was that I could not trace the author of this gem. If any reader is able to enlighten me on its origin, I should be deeply indebted for the information. Meanwhile, I will wrestle with my self-satisfaction for the sake of my professional colleagues.

Genes, race and country of origin

An interesting discussion of the relation between genetic makeup and clinical questions of treatment for disease is published in *Nature* for 24 July by three biologists from the United States. They maintain that race as a biological concept has a variety of meanings. It may refer to any distinguishable type within a species. The distinction is between skin colour, facial features, and hair form, which clearly differ in the inhabitants of different regions of the world. However, studies of genetic diversity have shown that genes vary between individuals of different races more widely than between those connected with country of origin.

Whether race has much meaning when applied to the clinical complications of medicine is controversial. It is possible to detect DNA sequences that indicate geographical origin, but most genetic diversity is found within population groups, and only a little between different groups. Evidently, genes that are geographically distinctive in frequency do not reflect the human genome in general. Knowing the ancestry of a patient may assist diagnosis and treatment, but to base this merely on a consideration of race is not useful. Racial characteristics may alter when individuals migrate to different regions and mate with residents there.

With large-scale colonial expansion and such influences as the slave trade, many people can claim ancestry from more than one major geographical region. Sickle cell disease, thought of as an African trait from a malarial region, may now be seen in individuals from the Mediterranean and southern India. Race and ancestry may be confused in such a way as will have a disturbing effect on medical practice.

The conventional definition of race will provide the clinician with guidance based on the social circumstances and lifestyle of a patient, but the likelihood that the individual has a genetic constitution affecting disease and any complications of treatment must be based on ancestry, which may prove complex. In both diagnosis and treatment, useful information must be sought in specific genetic characteristics and not in racial features.

Feathered friends

Exclusive of the melody and notes of birds, which everyone must admire, surely their various flights, the operations of their lives, their nest-making and the rearing of their young, with the variety of their calls, cheering us thro' day and night, ought to inspire us with consideration for ourselves and them. — John Byng, Viscount Torrington: 'Rides around Britain' (1793).