

Folklore in the isles with Tom Muir

Tom is a champion of Orkney's folk tales, bringing them back to the public through books and as a professional storyteller. His day job is at the Orkney Museum, which involves working with the media in radio, newspapers, magazines and TV. Alongside his wife Rhonda, he runs the website Orkneyology.com, which is now expanding into a publishing company. This will bring more stories into the world at a time when they are much needed.



When asked about why folklore is important, Tom says, "I think that if you want to understand a people you've got to understand their folk tales – I've always felt that. It reflects the character of the people and also in the technical age we still need a bit of magic in our lives and that's what this supplies; it's a connection with your ancestors. Also, it's good entertainment!"

Tom tells two traditional tales to celebrate Scotland's Year of Stories, one from Orkney and one from Shetland.

An Orkney Folk Tale: Assipattle and the Stoorworm

There was once a kingdom in the north that suffered a terrible fate. The Stoorworm arrived at its coast and started to yawn. The Stoorworm was the oldest and largest of all the sea serpents and its yawning meant that it was hungry and needed to be fed.

A wise man said that the only way to save the country was to feed the Stoorworm seven people every Saturday morning. This happened for a time, but it was too high a price to pay, so the king turned back to the wise man for more advice. He was told that **the only thing that would make the Stoorworm go**

away is if it was fed the king's only child, the Princess Gem-de-Lovely.

Instead, the king called for a brave knight to fight and kill the Stoorworm in return for his kingdom and the king's magic sword, Sikkersnapper. Many brave knights answered the challenge, but most ran away or fainted when they saw how big the monster was. Eventually the king declared that he would fight the Stoorworm himself.

On a small farm there lived a couple with seven sons. The six eldest worked hard, but **the youngest did nothing but lie by the fireside, raking through the ashes, so they called him Assipattle (ash-raker)**. He said that he would fight the Stoorworm, but his brothers just beat him and called him names.

The night before the king was due to fight the monster, Assipattle stole his father's horse and rode to the bay where the Stoorworm's head lay. He found a small cottage there and took an iron pot into which he placed a glowing peat from the fire.

He stole the king's boat and sailed towards the monster, just as it woke. The water that flowed into the Stoorworm's mouth as it

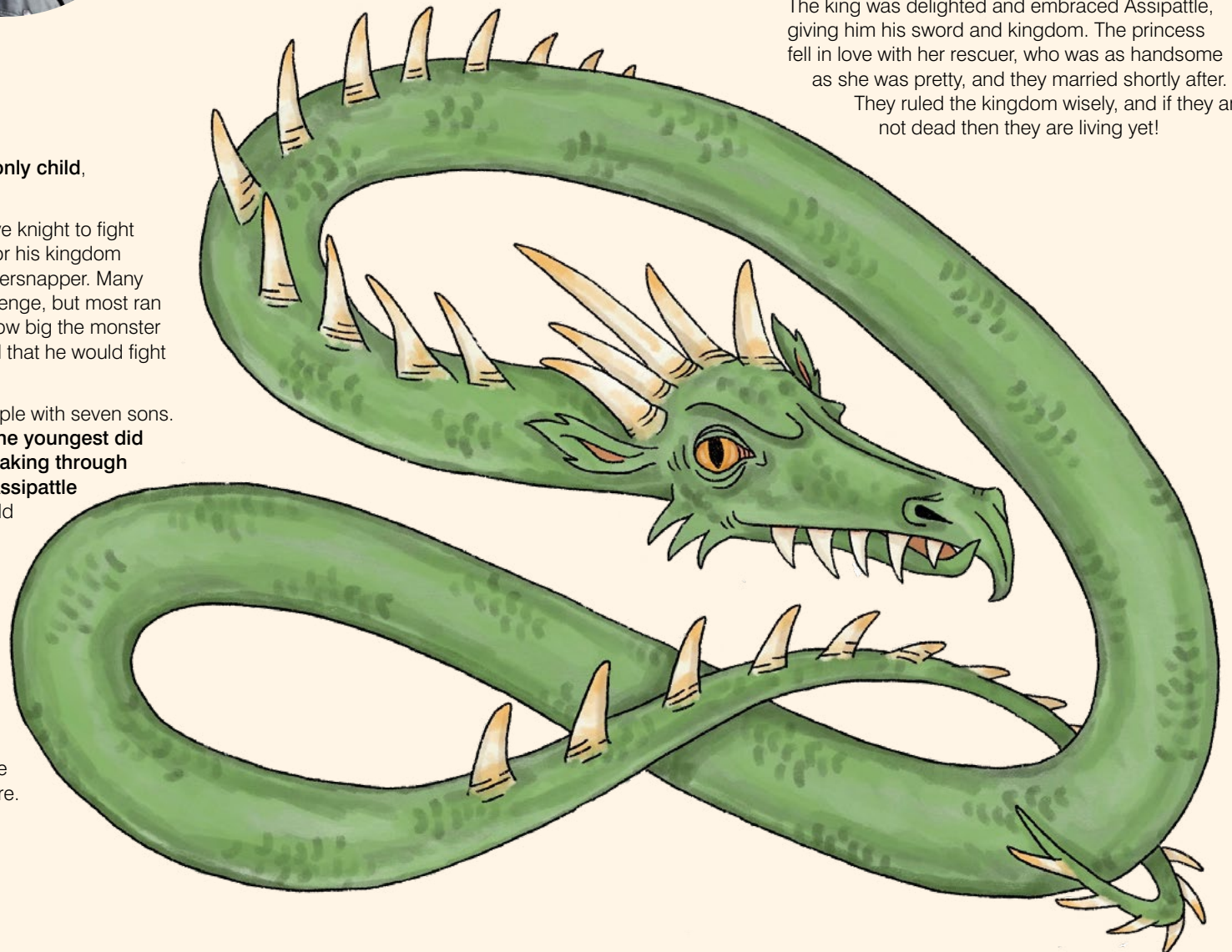
yawned carried Assipattle and the boat down its throat. **When the boat came to rest inside the monster, he ran until he found the Stoorworm's liver and he set it on fire with the smouldering peat.** The oil in the liver spluttered into flames and was soon blazing away.

The king had arrived just in time to see Assipattle sail his boat into the monster's mouth and be swallowed. He expected his kingdom to be destroyed at any time. But instead, they saw smoke coming out the Stoorworm's nose and mouth. The dying creature spewed out all the water that was in it, including Assipattle and the boat.

It shot out its huge forked tongue and grabbed the moon, but it slipped over it and fell to earth with a crash. The tongue left a huge hole in the surface of the earth, which filled with water to become the Baltic Sea. Its head rose up high and fell back down with such a force that some of its teeth were knocked out. **These teeth made the Orkney Islands.**

A second time the head rose and fell, knocking out more teeth, which became Shetland. A third time saw more teeth knocked out, making the Faroe Islands. **Then it curled up its body into a tight lump and died, and there it remains as Iceland.** The volcanos and boiling water gushing out of the ground are the result of the fire that still rages in the Stoorworm's liver.

The king was delighted and embraced Assipattle, giving him his sword and kingdom. The princess fell in love with her rescuer, who was as handsome as she was pretty, and they married shortly after. They ruled the kingdom wisely, and if they are not dead then they are living yet!



A Shetland Folk Tale: Robbie Anderson and the Trows

Folk tales were told in the Northern Isles in times gone past featuring magical creatures living in the landscape. We hope you enjoy this traditional tale from Shetland, Robbie Anderson and the Trows, released to celebrate Scotland's Year of Stories.

Robbie Anderson lived in Cullivoe in the island of Yell with his wife and children. The Andersons were poor people, eking out a living from the land and fishing. **Robbie was famous for being the best fiddle player in the parish.**

One Owld Yul Een (Old Christmas Eve, 7th January) Robbie was returning from feeding his sheep when he was accosted on the path by a tiny man with red hair that Robbie knew was a trow (a fairy). Robbie didn't trust the trows and wanted nothing to do with them.

"Robbie!" he said, "I want you to play at our Owld Yul Foy." A foy is a party. "I'm sorry." Robbie replied, "On Owld Yul Een I go to visit friends and play for them." **The trow said, "If you change your mind, I will make it worth your while but if you do play for us, you must not tell anyone."**

Robbie found the decision really hard, but when night came, he took his fiddle under his arm and set off towards the trow's home. The door in the hillside was open and there were sounds of laughter and glasses clinking. The same tiny red haired trow was there to greet him.

The trows loved Robbie's music and Robbie played like he had never played before, in fact, some of the tunes that he played were unknown to him. He

played until morning when he was left on his own. **The trows had promised to pay him, but Robbie got nothing, not even a thank you.** He dreaded the reunion with his wife; he had refused to tell her where he was going. It was not a warm welcome that Robbie got from his wife.

The last day of January brought a blizzard, one of the biggest snowfalls in living memory. When the sky cleared the frost was severe. The sea was like a mirror and Robbie's neighbours suggested that they try some fishing. **When they got to the fishing-grounds the fish were plentiful and easy to catch,** in fact they took the hooks so keenly that they didn't even need to bait them. For several days Robbie and his neighbours got enough fish to keep them going for a while and even had enough to give to the old people in the parish.

One day Robbie declined to go fishing, as he had work on the farm that needed his attention. The men set off, but without Robbie they caught very few fish. Two days later Robbie went back with them and they had fish galore. This got Robbie thinking. He wondered if it had anything to do with the trows.

The thaw came with gales and rain. The men had to go to the hills and look for the sheep. Everyone had losses, except Robbie. All his sheep were alive and well. **Gales in September destroyed the crop, except for Robbie's corn, which stood tall and heavy with grain.**

On Owld Yul Een, Robbie took the same path as he had done the previous year. He met the same tiny red haired trow and was again invited to play at their foy. And so it went on, year after year. Through his good luck Robbie and his family were no longer poor.

One year the trow failed to appear, although Robbie walked the path several times. That evening Robbie took his fiddle and set out for the trow's home. The place was as silent as the grave, only a small fire was burning. **Beside it an old trow woman was sitting.** "Thank you for coming, Robbie, but you are not needed." "Where is everyone?" he asked.

"Everybody has left." she said. "There is a new minister living nearby. He hates us trows and preaches against us. My folk have gone to the Faroe Islands to be away from him, but I'm too old to move and I'm a bit deaf, so I can't hear him anyway."

Slowly, Robbie made his way home. His wife was surprised to see him, but they went to their neighbours' houses and he played for them, just like he had done in the past.

He had no more trowie luck from that day forward, he was an ordinary man again, like everyone else.

