

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

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(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

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Algernon Blackwood, *Roarings From Further Out* (ed. Xavier Aldana Reyes)

(London: The British Library, 2019)

Daniel Pietersen

With their Tales of the Weird series, the British Library has been quietly building an outstanding library of thematic anthologies, often featuring lesser-known authors of strange tales. The nautical horrors of *From The Depths* or the sinister vegetation of *Evil Roots*, for example, are both excellent showcases of largely ignored short, weird fiction. Yet there is also room for single-author collections, offering new editions of authors both obscure and relatively well-known. *Roarings From Further Out* is one of these collections. It features four of Algernon Blackwood's novellas and a thankfully spoiler-free introduction from Xavier Aldana Reyes, Reader in English Literature in Film at Manchester Metropolitan University and the editor of this volume.

Born in 1869, Blackwood was a prolific author of fourteen novels and a large number of shorter works. He was also a great lover of both the outdoors and the inner, spiritual life of humanity. These apparently conflicting interests can be seen in his writing and, indeed, their friction lends the weirdness to much of his work. Ann and Jeff VanderMeer (2011) describe how, in Blackwood's tales, 'unease is generated by ambiguity that mixes the weird with a talent for writing about wild or rural places—a break with the past and the classic haunted house' (p. 27). This break with the past's concerns led Blackwood to, they continue, 'usher in the modern era of weird fiction' (p. 27). Aldana Reyes, in his introduction to this collection, appears to agree: 'What distinguishes Blackwood from other weird writers is not just his interest in the occult and his intrinsic style, but his outlook on life and its spiritual links to nature' (p. 10). In fact, Blackwood 'blurs the distinctions between the human world and a wider natural and spiritual ecology' (Smith and Hughes, 2013: p. 6).

Two of Blackwood's most famous tales, 'The Willows' and 'The Wendigo', make up half of this collection, and it is these two which, perhaps, most clearly demonstrate this blurring in Blackwood's work. Both feature attempts by 'civilised' men (and it is always men) to colonise the wild places of the world and both show how the mental landscapes of the colonisers are themselves

colonised by the terrors they find there.

‘The Willows’ tells the story of two unnamed protagonists, canoeing between Vienna and Budapest, and their experiences amongst the shifting sandbars of the Danube. Blackwood near-effortlessly builds tension from the initial sight of ‘an immense army of dancing, shouting willow bushes, closing from all sides, shining with spray and clapping their thousand little hands as though to applaud our efforts’ (p. 19) to the over-powering resonance of a ‘nonhuman sound’ (p. 59) that seems to emanate from some space beyond the willows, beyond even the reality in which the willows exist. Blackwood imbues the natural elements with such a sense of life and sinister intent— ‘How [the river] stood up and shouted when the rains fell flat on its face! And how its laughter roared out when the wind blew upstream and tried to stop its growing speed!’ (p. 21)— that every facet of the environment in which the two canoeists find themselves takes on a malevolent, preternatural aura. ‘The Willows’ is genuinely terrifying and, without doubt, one of the finest works of weird fiction. Like MR James’ ‘Oh Whistle And I’ll Come To You My Lad’, it manages to prick the hubris of human belief in our mastery, even our base understanding, of the non-human world.

While the protagonists of ‘The Willows’ blundered unwittingly into ‘a kingdom that was reserved for the use of others who had a right to it, with everywhere unwritten warnings to trespassers for those who had the imagination to discover them’, (p. 19), the hunting party of ‘The Wendigo’ have the explicit intention of trespassing into the Canadian wilds and taking its resources for their own. It’s not surprising, then, that they encounter—and, in some cases, are consumed by—the wendigo. A part of Algonquin-speaking people’s folklore, the wendigo is an avatar of greed and hunger in both physical and spiritual senses. It is a being that consumes, not so much to sustain itself but in order to starve others, and there is a clear parallel here between the wendigo’s famine-related actions and those of colonising powers. Yet ‘The Wendigo’ is not just a polemic, but also a finely-written story of weird horror; Simpson’s terrified pursuit of the tracker Défago, who has been snatched up (or perhaps possessed) by the wendigo itself, left me as breathless as if I’d run the long miles myself.

Sandwiched between these two complementary tales is ‘Ancient Sorceries’, a story from

Blackwood's John Silence series. In it, the meek Arthur Vezin stumbles into a mysterious French town that seems to exist outside the normal flow of time and is populated by not-entirely-human citizens. Eventually, he comes to understand the meaning of the warning he is offered on his arrival; cryptically, he is cautioned to be on his guard 'because of the sleep and because of the cats' (p. 85). I found myself thinking more than once of Clark Ashton Smith's 'A Night In Malnéant' when reading 'Ancient Sorceries'. Although Smith's tale was published over twenty years after Blackwood's, the same sense of temporal repetition and intertwined lineages persists between the two. In some ways, this makes 'Ancient Sorceries' feel more generic in its narrative, although not unpleasantly so, than the previous two tales. There is certainly less here of an ecohorror persuasion.

The final entry in this collection, 'The Man Whom the Trees Loved', works almost as a counterpoint to 'The Willows' and 'The Wendigo' and returns more blatantly to ideas of the ecoGothic. In it, however, the one-time ranger and woodsman David Bittacy is not terrorised by the natural world but beckoned back to it, slowly shedding his humanity as he returns to the woods. Despite this different take on colonial concerns, I found Bittacy's fate, unlike either 'The Willows' or 'The Wendigo', a bit of a slog to work through. There is a kind of tedious presumption of superiority here; some people are simply more deeply attuned to the world than others. This is borne out by the condescending representation of Bittacy's wife, Sophia, as someone who 'like many women, never really thought at all but merely reflected the images of others' thinking' (p. 212). In a more subtle telling, Sophia's concern for her husband and the superstitious fear the woods hold for her Christianity could have been an interesting contrast to the atavistic, sublime joy they generate in David. That this grown woman, in her late middle age, is instead repeatedly rendered as foolish and almost lacking in agency gives 'The Man Whom the Trees Loved' an unpleasant feeling of smugness, if not outright misogyny.

In some ways, though, these issues throw the astonishing accomplishment of 'The Willows' into sharp relief. Contrast is, after all, the purpose of collections like this, and I can see that, despite its flaws, 'The Man Whom the Trees Loved' is an interesting inclusion purely because of how it subverts the way that the wilderness is often depicted as threatening—indeed, how Blackwood himself depicts it—and makes Nature into a more complex entity: a sublime combination that is both terrifying and enticing.

With *Roarings From Further Out*, the British Library and Aldana Reyes, along with impeccable design by Mauricio Villamayor and cover artwork from Enrique Bernadou, have fashioned another excellent entry in the Tales of the Weird series, one that I am pleased to add to my slowly increasing collection.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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