

## Between Black and White: our Stories about Ourselves

An essay by Helen Moore

“Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nation live by and tell themselves and you change the individuals and nations. Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings.” Ben Okri

The white-powdered, bewigged merchants and politicians of eighteenth century Britain, North America and Old Europe infamously justified the genocidal slave trade with stories they told themselves about the sub-human characteristics of Negroes – ideas too grotesque to warrant repeating here – but which were based on the false premise of divisions between the human species along racial lines. Land was stolen from countless native peoples by Britain’s royal declaration of ‘terra nullius’ – no man’s land - and so our nation became ‘Great’. Finally, after unspeakable suffering, slavery was ended by campaigners drawing on Enlightenment notions of the Rights of Man, from which stems our Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an important safeguard against history’s repetitions and serving to help indigenous peoples in their ongoing struggles for survival today.

Yet I believe there are other stories underlying those old attitudes - myths in particular about civilisation and inevitable progress - whose pernicious roots remain both in British and Western consciousness and whose consequences are more wide-reaching and destructive than ever we might imagine. Although modern Britain clearly attempts to identify itself as being a multi-faith, multi-cultural nation, racial discrimination is still a major issue for our society, with institutional racism, islamaphobia, oppressive attitudes towards asylum-seekers, the BNP and religious fundamentalism. There are also sharp splits between urban and rural life and regional divisions and the United Kingdom still struggles to dissolve decades of sectarian hatred in Northern Ireland (a legacy of empire). Meanwhile, Wales and Scotland enjoy devolved power and a greater sense of their own identities, leaving the English in a restless struggle to find themselves - the anglo-centric Establishment able only, it seems, to clutch at Royalty, cricket and warm beer as national symbols, and every summer, to our nation’s shame, Prom-concert goers unselfconsciously sing along to the jingoistic strains of ‘Rule Britannia’.

Nevertheless, in 2000 a landmark report was published by Lord Parekh called ‘The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain’, in which his commission’s top recommendation for tackling racism was to recognise that ‘Britain is a recent creation, and that colonialism and empire were integral to its making.’ Parekh tells us that if Britain is instead to become ‘a community of communities... at ease with its place in the world and with its own internal differences,’ then we must engage in ‘rethinking our national story.’ His report then goes on to quote Ben Okri, as above.

To my mind, this kind of full acknowledgement of England’s colonial, land-grabbing and ethnic-cleansing past and its consequences (both overseas and nearer at hand in Ireland, Scotland and Wales) is key to this necessary rethinking. True stories need to be taught in our schools and in a spirit of truth and reconciliation our government needs to apologise for what England has done, setting the standard of a wholehearted embrace of the cultural and ethnic diversity that our colonial past has created for us.

But even if this were to happen, what singularity can there be to bind us together, despite our cultural and spiritual diversity? What is there actually to unite us, to reconcile our own internal differences, to stop us becoming millions of strangers in a strange land?

Surely, apart from our humanity, it's precisely the land itself, and ultimately our planet Earth, which we all have in common? It takes only a single generation of immigrants to grow accustomed to the British climate and way of life, to feel shaped by the winds, rains and intermittent sun of our fertile isles, just as much by the diverse accents and dialects, food and culture, so that when they visit their parents' homeland, they may often find themselves alien there. Yet mostly our immigrants are confined to the inner cities and amongst even those 'native' country-dwellers, who can trace their lineage back many generations on this soil, a sense of belonging to the land has been steadily eroded from the collective consciousness. Knowledge of our native plants and animals is at an all time low amongst young people,<sup>1</sup> our folklore and earth-based traditions and rituals have all but disappeared, and the pro-hunting lobby are thus able to make the preposterous claim that they are the sole guardians of rural British life.

In *The Myths We Live By*, Mary Midgely<sup>ii</sup> explores the kinds of stories that have been integrated into our Western world-view. She writes: "We are accustomed to think of myths as the opposite of science. But in fact they are a central part of it: the part that decides its significance in our lives...." She examines the predominantly hostile view of the Earth that has been 'effective in our thinking, even in our sciences' and writes: "for a long time it prevented us from seeing the Earth as an intelligible system at all." She also looks at the way the inter-connected myths of inevitable progress and the omniscience of science shape our lives today.

And she is right to point at these stories that underlie our culture, for they have serious, if not pathological consequences for us and our planet. Our predominantly secular and material society offers the veneration of money, success and sexuality as paths to personal happiness, while many people put their faith in the notion that science and technology are the instruments for creating a better world. Consequently, our countryside is carved up to build more and more roads and everyday we lose yet more of the Earth's biodiversity. Cultural diversity is also threatened by globalisation and as a direct result of Western activities in distant places around the world, indigenous people's lives, ways of being and habitats are swept away by the free market's insatiable drive for raw materials, decisions made in remote, air-conditioned offices leading to the clear-felling of swathes of Amazonias with scant regard for the by now well-documented consequences on human beings and eco-systems.

In his essay 'The Psychopathology of the Human-Nature Relationship',<sup>iii</sup> Ralph Metzner writes: "we as a species are suffering from a kind of collective amnesia. We have forgotten something our ancestors once knew and practised – certain attitudes and kinds of perception, an ability to empathize with nonhuman life, respect for the mysterious, and humility in relationship to the infinite complexities of the natural world." He goes on to state the importance of indigenous peoples in helping us to remember some of these 'vital attitudes and values that they have preserved and maintained in their ways of life'. And explains: "the idea that the spiritual and the natural are opposed or that spirituality must always transcend nature is a culturally relative concept not shared by non-monotheistic religions or traditional societies. In

indigenous cultures... the natural world is regarded as the realm of spirit and the sacred; the natural is the spiritual.”

This is not to argue for a sweeping away of the monotheistic religions that are part of our contemporary multi-faith culture, nor for a rejection of modern societies or science and technology - although of course we need to be working with, rather than against Nature, technological solutions to our dependence on non-renewable resources being just one excellent example of this. However, I’m convinced that our amnesia and sense of ourselves as modern, civilised beings – a linear development from those bewigged eighteenth century gents, who sanctioned the slave trade - creates a repressed shadow side. This not only projects our primitivity and animal natures onto indigenous peoples around the world, but also rears its ugly head in periodic upsurges of racism at home and contributes to our destructive behaviour towards our land and our planet.

Part of the rethinking of our national story, to which Lord Parekh urges us, must thus surely be the greater acknowledgement of Britain’s ancestral heritage - our own indigenous cultures? Although they stem from a preliterate society and lack a continuous lineage into the modern day, I believe they are still embedded in our genetic patterning. They reside inside our primitive brains, urging us to reconnect with Nature and the Great Wheel of the Year, which still underlies our most important annual festivals: Christmas, Easter and Hallowe’en. Although completely subsumed by consumerism, the symbolism of witches, ghosts, decorated trees, chocolate eggs and cuddly rabbits embedded in these popular festivals all allude to the pre-Christian earth-based spirituality of our forebears, who celebrated the Earth’s fertility and major seasonal thresholds, or - to quote Ronald Hutton’s appropriation of the Christianity, as the title for his comprehensive study of our ancient heritage - The Stations of the Sun.<sup>iv</sup>

In fact, although we have forgotten the legacy of our ancestors, our landscape still abounds with the remains of Britain’s oldest, pre-Christian cultures. Horses, giants and long men stand proudly in white outlines on many of our green hillsides and there are mighty stones erected in formations that are celestial maps or markers of the earth’s transit around the fiery, life-giving orb we call the Sun. However, as a society, Britain has an ambiguous relationship with these presences; they are at best quaint tourist attractions, while our ancient cultures figure only obliquely in the story we tell about ourselves. Certainly, our children our taught little about this part of our culture – anyone would think British history began with the Romans! Instead, our ancestors’ ‘primitive’ expressions remain the preserve of archaeologists, pre-historians and the several thousands of people - myself included – who, in wanting to honour the Earth and to celebrate her cycles of birth, death and resurrection, struggle for the right to attend gatherings at such sacred sites as Stonehenge or Avebury.

I say ‘struggle’ since we have to put up with such indignities as police surveillance of our vehicles (I wonder what uproar there would be if the same took place outside a church or even a mosque?) and the presence of traffic on roads that either bisect or threaten the integrity of these fragile sites. ‘Paganism’ is still a dirty word in mainstream British culture, imbued with the worst of the Reformation’s vitriol against ‘popish’ and ‘superstitious’ practices, which lumped the synthesizing and more sympathetic attitudes of the earlier Celtic Christian and Roman Catholic churches with the earth-based rituals and traditions of our ancestors, persecuting them all. Yet I believe that it’s actually essential for us British - no matter what colour, faith or creed - to come to see ourselves

as both ancient and modern and for the Establishment to take a good deal more seriously the green spiritual consciousness of Britain's pre-Christian ancestry, which is steadily enjoying a popular revival all around Britain today.

With its centre arguably in the heart of Avalon at Glastonbury, this predominantly Celtic revival is increasingly evident up and down our island in diverse events from Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Festival – now Europe's largest fire festival - to here in Somerset, the resurrection of local Wassailing rites. It's apparent in the growing popularity of Wicca, through the revival of our native Bardic and Druidic traditions and in many other diverse ways often crossing over into the political sphere at road-protest sites or anti-GM campaigns, where there is a sense that our Earth is suffering through the predations of the all-devouring economic system we live under. And this resurgence is something the establishment needs to acknowledge if it's to stay in touch with the people. Revived native traditions need to be embraced as another part of twenty-first century, multi-faith, multicultural Britain, and, I believe, as a core part of our national identity.

Between black and white and our stories about ourselves, I would thus invite not grey as the middle-ground between monochrome polarities, but green. This is the colour of the plant life that sustains us and so many of the earth's creatures, and which maintains the atmosphere of our planet to support our rich biodiversity. Green consciousness needs to feature far more in the way we see ourselves - the true stories we tell ourselves. The importance of this is underlined by ecologist Alastair Macintosh in his book: *Soil and Soul – the People versus Corporate Culture*.<sup>v</sup> He writes: "where you come from, who you are and what your destiny proves to be are all linked within that story, which is nothing less than the story of the world's creation, of the human and animal forebears, and of the world's destiny." Our new stories need to begin....

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<sup>i</sup> See BBC Science and Nature, 'Are naturalists a dying breed?' by Phil Gates

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/animals/features/288feature1.shtml>

<sup>ii</sup> Midgley, M., 2004, *The Myths We Live By*, Routledge, London

<sup>iii</sup> See Roszak, T., Gomes, M.E., and Kanner, A. D., (date?): *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, Sierra Club Books, San Francisco

<sup>iv</sup> Hutton, R., 1996: *The Stations of the Sun*, OUP, Oxford

<sup>v</sup> Macintosh, A., 2001: *Soil and Soul: People versus Corporate Power*, Aurum Press, London