

Ceri Houlbrook, *The Magic of Coin-Trees from Religion to Recreation: The Roots of a Ritual*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018; ISBN 9783319755175; ePDF, x, 307 pp.

This valuable study is not primarily concerned with Scotland, but rather with the vernacular ritual of embedding coins in trees as a means of expressing intent or making a wish. This is likely to have descended from “implanted” trees, in which objects including teeth, blood, nails, pins, and so on were pressed into trees, usually to cure ailments (toothache, pain, bleeding). Ceri Houlbrook compiled a catalogue of coin trees as part of her doctoral research, and argues that their contemporaneity does not preclude them from being studied as examples of folklore and ritual practice. The earliest reference to a coin-tree is by the antiquarian Thomas Pennant in 1775: the tree in question is a stump on Isle Maree in Wester Ross, Scotland. Loch Maree has varied folklore, including miracle cures (chiefly of insanity) from drinking at the well of St Maelrubha. The well was disused and dried up by the mid-nineteenth century, but tree devotions continued. A rag tree was transformed into a nail tree by 1863; and in the 1890s this tree was studded with a range of metal objects. The rise of coins as the appropriate object for insertion is known from the diary of Queen Victoria, who visited in 1877, and “[b]y the 1920s, when lieutenant colonel and medical doctor George Edington wrote about his visit to the island, no pins or nails were visible in the bark of the tree, only coins” (pp. 30-31). The majority of other early attested coin-trees are from Ireland; Houlbrook locates coin donation in a range of devotions to trees and wells in Britain and Ireland, including rag trees and votives at water sites, like pilgrims at St Mary’s well, Culloden “who believed that drinking water from the well and then depositing a coin ensured good luck for the following year” (p. 54).

Houlbrook spends time discussing the historical development and proliferation of coin-trees, their typical locations and the ways that visitors hammer in coins, and how the coins make the trees into something alien, a sort of artwork, which she calls a “captivating object” (p. 117). The fact that children are most often those who want to insert coins is noted, and the distinctly contemporary practice of attaching padlocks to bridges and fences by young lovers is briefly covered as an example of a folkloric frame that has received new content. It is also observed that folkloric sites often clump together; for example, the rag trees at St Boniface’s Well, Munlochry (the Black Isle, Scotland) are “a mere six miles” from the Fairy Glen coin-trees (p. 167) and the practices associated with both sites are similar. Moreover, visitors often return (annually, or on significant anniversaries) to add further coins. Coin-trees are spread around Britain and Ireland; they are connected to saints’ cults, supernatural beings (the fairies of Fairy Glen, Black Isle), and occasional historical persons. There is an interesting discussion of pilgrim behaviours that have often damaged holy trees in Britain, and how coin insertion can bring about the death of some trees. Debates about ritual litter and the heritage value of folkloric sites and practices are reviewed, including the removal of coin-trees as a means of preservation.

The status of pieces of such trees that are removed to museums, or even trees in situ that are fenced off from visitors and devotees is ambiguous. Houlbrook’s “Concluding Thoughts” opens with her wet and chilly search for the coin-tree on the Ardmaddy Estate, on the Degnish

peninsula in Argyll, Scotland. This tree is in extremis: “Having fallen in the 1990s, it lies gnarled and forlorn in the grass, battered by the wind and blackened by the rain. Heavily decayed, whole limbs have fallen off and the whole tree looks too fragile to touch, let alone hammer coins into. But that’s exactly what people have done—hundreds of them, if the quantity of coins is anything to go by” (p. 242). The discussion of this tree and the practices surrounding it enable Houlbrook to review the different themes and motifs of each preceding chapter, covering questions of antiquity, ritual, superstition, healing, wishes, and continued human deposition of coins and other offerings. Human activity confirmed the specialness of the Ardmaddy Wishing Tree but also brought about its death. The tree is now the focus of a heritage project to document and preserve all that is known of this remarkable object. For readers interested in British and Irish folklore and vernacular practices, *The Magic of Coin-Trees from Religion to Recreation* is a gem. It is packed with fascinating information and framed by the latest scholarship from archaeology, heritage, and folkloric studies, which is judiciously applied and presents the details of the particular trees in useful ways. This book is highly recommended.

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