



Classics in Short No 129: The Little Grey Men, Last of the Little People

Article Author:

[Brian Alderson](#) [1]

[230](#) [2]

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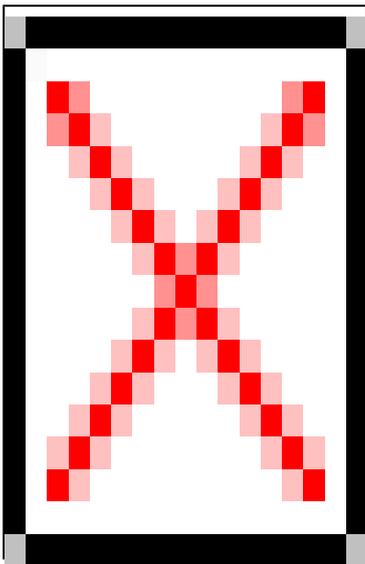
Classics in Short

Byline:

The Little Grey Men, Last of the Little People

'Warwickshire'

claims our anthropologist of a now almost vanished rural England, 'is one of the last counties where one might hope to



meet with a fairy'. The date was 1942 and, deeply versed in his subject, he rightly reprobates the idea of fairies as being 'miniature men and women with ridiculous tinsel wings doing all sorts of impossible things with flowers and cobwebs'. They are rather hidden tribes ? like those that Kipling knew ? living a parallel life among the creatures of the wild who are their neighbours.

This history

tells of an adventure of the last family of gnomes known to the author, surviving alongside the Folly stream in Shakespeare's county. There are three of them (brothers, with lives improbably dating back to Roman times) and they have conceived an expedition up-river to try to find a lost sibling who had set off a year or two back to try to find the Folly's source..

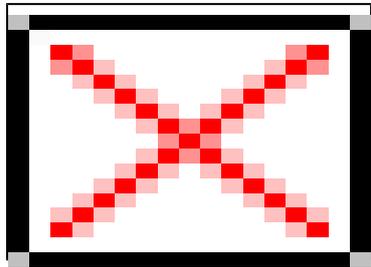
True to the practicalities

of their kind, they are skilled in woodcraft and in combating the dangers that nature throws at them, while their joyous consumption of fish and other local delicacies is regarded as a painful, life-preserving necessity and does not interfere with their otherwise companionable relations with their neighbours. Their historian's deep knowledge of the natural world produces a running commentary on the flow of the seasons and their unforeseen complications to whose vagaries the parallel lives, of all the characters are subject.

The travelogue

as a narrative form is infinitely flexible and it is left to the storyteller to devise the snakes-and-ladders progress that is the essence of so many 'there-and-back-again' stories. To begin with there is a row when one-legged Dodder, the oldest and wisest of the three, deplures the decision to go adventuring and decides to stay at home. Baldmoney and Sneezewort are determined however, and build a rather handsome timber paddle-boat to row themselves upstream.

Despite their craftsmanship



this boat will suffer two calamities, in between which Dodder has a change of heart and has himself transported to join them by his friend Sir Herne the heron. There is an interim Midsummer Night's climax when all the Stream Folk are summoned by a Grahame-ish Pan who brings about the destruction of the Giant Grum (a cruel human landowner) but too great demands are eventually made on the slender resources of the travellers and with winter approaching they give up the search. (In one dramatic episode, marooned on an island, they escape starvation only by the fortuitous appearance of a child's wonderfully elaborate clockwork toy boat, the *Jeanie Deans*, and she will carry them back to the final unexpected eucatastrophe.)

B.B.

was a writer devoted to the countryside and its inhabitants (despite which he picked for his pseudonym the designation of a cartridge used in the shooting of geese). He has a friendly and not over-didactic relationship with his readers, most of whom he recognizes will not know the difference between a stoat and a ferret, or the variations of bird calls: 'Tit-tee, tit-tee, tit-tee', the all-clear call of the blue tit; 'Tic, tic, tic' and urgent call from a robin. Both the descriptions and drama of the landscapes that he gives us are enhanced by the wonderfully-conceived scraperboard drawings, vignettes and full-pages, by D.J. Watkins-Pitchford who is, of course, B.B. himself, whose prolific graphic work accompanies him in many forms through the many books for children and adults which make up his oeuvre.

Published during the War,

The Little Grey Men touches only momentarily on the contemporary scene, a mention of U-boats, or the portraits of the King and Queen decorating the tiny walls of the *Jeanie Deans*. . It is much more in the tradition of the celebrants of English ruralism ? **Bevis**, **The Fairy Caravan**, **Watership Down** ? although coloured by his awareness of how vulnerable his chosen Warwickshire was to creeping modernity: 'intersected by roads and railways, with modern villas and towns everywhere'.

His forebodings

about his setting were fulfilled in the story's successor **Down the Bright Stream** (1948 ? although the occurrence of war-time events point to it as an immediate successor). The story begins with the Stream People fleeing their much-loved Folly Brook as its waters are diverted to a reservoir and it is easy now to see that as a portent of a future land where green belts are disregarded and every village is blessed with its own bungalow suburb or even a pretty business park as local councils work hand in glove with the developers. A revived *Jeanie Deans* carries the travellers to what seems to be the Warwickshire Avon and after another sequence of perilous episodes its crew made landfall by owl-propelled glider on a green island, 'wild and wet' as gnomes desire across the Irish Channel. There is no 'back again' to this journey, and, if it is true that our gnomes date from Caesar's time then they are probably living there still.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**

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Page Number:

30

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